

Theology as Style:

*Dinah Mulock Craik, Margaret Oliphant, and the development
of the modern religious subject*

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Abstract

This study argues that, in terms of their engagement with theological discourse, the contribution of women writers to the rise of modernity has been presented, incorrectly, as an element in the secularization paradigm of history, itself now seen by many scholars as an overly simplistic account. Because most existing critical approaches to reading women's theology and literature also fail to provide an adequate historical analysis, my study presents a series of comparative readings that attempt to rectify this situation. I argue that the texts of Dinah Mulock Craik and Margaret Oliphant, two popular and influential nineteenth-century authors, while differing in many ways, both function as agents of "religionization," engaged in a conscious and crafted dialogue with secularity, and promoting a feminine non-sectarianism that opposes a domestic maternal realm to the social and theological law and institutions of the Fathers. I consider these texts to be involved in the development of a "somatic textuality," that is, the embodiment of theology and the rise of the textualized religious subject. This modern religious subject, like Nancy Armstrong's generic modern individual outlined in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), is primarily female and exists, as do the texts themselves, in a complex relationship to hegemony.

My readings trace the development of this somatic textuality from mid-century to the *fin de siècle*. I find that both authors write the body as essential to the integrity and realisation of the word, and that both explore the poetics of faith and the politics of religious literacy. I conclude that Craik's and Oliphant's texts are involved in the delineation and dissemination of a form of "diffusive Christianity," "diffusive" both in the sociological/historical sense and in a discursive sense referring to the intertextual transformation of theology—"theology as style."

Introduction

That a modern society is a secular society holds the status of a truism in Western ideology. That politics and religion be constitutionally divorced or at least separated is regarded as a prerequisite for the desirable "modern" society. However, Westerners commenting on a society where this is not the case often reveal the moralistic underpinnings of their equation of modernity and secularity. Societies where religion is still "public"—officially part of a society's public institutions and integral to the citizenry's public life—are seen as obscurantist and situated in an earlier stage of political development. This is often the tenor of Western comment on Islamic societies, even when the society in question has a secular government.¹ The idea that "belief," like sex, should be a strictly private matter is integral to the West's concept of modernity. This does not mean that religion does not enter public discourse, but such intercourse is to be understood as consensual and non-coercive. This is the case even in England, where a particular religious institution is still closely linked with the state. As well as being subordinate to the state, the Church of England is simply one of many religious institutions that citizens may or may not choose to patronise or criticise.

In Western historiography "freedom of religion" functions as a marker of modernity.² In contemporary Western societies "freedom of religion" relates primarily

¹ The relationship between the privatisation of religion and the development of a modern society generally runs thus: science displaces the divine as the main explanatory paradigm, thus enabling the growth of technology and industry; the "nation" replaces the religious community; democracy arises from the ashes of a divinely ordained hierarchy.

² For example, the authors of a recent history of modernity ask "What was it about [...European societies] that allowed them to make the innovations that have proved so fateful for the entire human community in recent centuries?" Their answer singles out the freedom of belief, albeit originally contingent rather than principled, as a crucial element:

The Reformation produced in Europe a cultural and religious variety to match its political and ethnic diversity. Protestants and Catholics alike regarded this as a failure, and each group would gladly have imposed its version of Christianity on everyone, had it only been possible. Tolerance became a necessity; it was not a virtue.

But it was precisely Europe's "failure" to achieve consensus and uniformity, in religious practices as well as in political life, that lowered the barriers to innovation and growth and set Europe, and Europe alone, on the path toward capitalist modernization and global domination.

See Robert W. Strayer et al, ch. 1: "Why Europe?" *The Making of the Modern World: Connected Histories, Divergent Paths; 1500 to the Present*, 2nd ed. (New York: St Martin's, 1995) 19, 37.

to matters of belief. Where religious practices are concerned there is a limit set by the laws of the land; one is entitled, however, to believe whatever one wishes. And, if one is not always allowed to *do* what one's beliefs suggest, one is allowed to express one's beliefs through language, one's right to *say* whatever one wishes is itself enshrined in law. The freedom of speech and of private belief, while theoretically allowing for social heterogeneity, in fact enables a diversity of subjectivities to function as an homogeneous society: how one formulates the meaning of existence matters little in the end to the machinery of state as long as one's outward behaviour remains within certain parameters. In fact, if one agrees with Robert Bellah's concept of civil religion, the privacy and therefore inviolability of belief and the freedom of its expression is "sacred" rather than secular; in the United States it is a principle enshrined in one of the society's most sacred texts.³ It is this textuality, and close, almost metonymic link between the freedom of speech and belief, the discursive heart of "modern" religion, that I want to bring out here, although I shall be returning to the uneasy Western formulation of "sacred" and "secular" later.

It is because of this distinction between belief and practice in modern hegemonic discourse, the privileging of individual, linguistic forms of expression over somatic, corporate forms, that I have chosen to use the term "theology" rather than "religion" in this study. "Religion," as any scholar of religion will attest, is notoriously difficult to define, partly because it is such an all-encompassing term. "Theology," on the other hand, is a term that is always linked with religious discourse, specifically of course, discourse about God. Because I deal with writing and texts, and consider the historical

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) identified Protestant individualism as a component in the rise of modern capitalism. For Weber the process of "rationalisation" in all areas, including religion, was an inescapable facet of social history.

³ Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Religion, American Style*, ed. P. H. McNamara (New York: Harper, 1974) 73-90. While Bellah's 1967 article is clearly addressed to the exigencies of his day (attempting to inject a note of moral purpose into American policy and to evoke national unity) his basic thesis—that there is a non-sectarian "public religious dimension [...] expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" (75)—has been highly influential. Bellah argues that the Constitution is one of American civil religion's sacred scriptures (79).

part these texts might have played in the growth of "modern" religion, "theology" fits this discursive emphasis far better than the vagueness and inclusiveness of "religion."

The texts under consideration in my study were written by two nineteenth-century British women: Dinah Mulock Craik and Margaret Oliphant.⁴ Neither was a professional theologian, and neither wrote what would commonly be considered theologies. Of course, in an age when women were barred from such roles few wrote such texts. "Theology" usually implies a systematic account of doctrine concerning God, and although at times I will be drawing out "systems" from the texts under consideration for the purposes of study, I am in no way claiming that either of my authors provides such an account, nor could they be said to be strictly systematic thinkers. "Systematic theology" is often understood as the discourse in toto, which alerts us to the battles over ownership and consequently definition that have surrounded the right to "talk about God." Such an understanding negates the possibility that the works of Craik or Oliphant could, or should, be discussed as examples of "theology" and would, perhaps, suggest that "spirituality," a term often used in connection with women, would be more suitable. Although strongly implicated in my approach "spirituality" is insufficient for my purposes for a number of reasons. Firstly, like "religion," it is simply too vague and inclusive a term. Secondly, it implies an ahistorical, psychological reality.⁵ Whether such a reality exists is not within the scope of this study, but as a concept it has little to offer the attempt at an historical account. Whether it has anything to offer the academic at all unless it is itself historicized is a question that will be considered in my first chapter in relation to reading historical texts.

In modern discourse "spirituality" is often used as an antonym of "theology." The term "spirituality" includes the reference to the direct experience of the ultimate and the experience itself, one has a "spiritual experience." A "theological experience," however, would be a very different thing. "Theology" denotes rational reflection on

⁴ Although the texts under consideration in this study were written by Dinah Maria Mulock before her marriage in 1865, for the sake of clarity and consistency I follow standard practice in referring to Craik by her married name. Similarly, I follow academic convention in using Oliphant's surname without the prefix "Mrs," despite the fact Oliphant was known professionally as "Mrs Oliphant."

and codification of the spiritual experience, it is a second-order language. Spirituality is also employed as a counterdiscourse to theology (used in its traditional sense): where theology is the rational product of an individual mind working from within an elite institutional base, spirituality is the instinctive expression of "grass-roots" communal experience (this might be understood as a community based on gender, culture or class for example). Further, where theology is linguistic, the product of human language, spirituality—although by definition incorporeal, that which is not the body—is also somehow somatic, a special kind of sense imprinted by God's Word in the *imago dei*, and thus ultimately beyond human codification. In this sense, entirely outside the realm of social control, it is both private and "free." Modern spirituality, whether Christian or not, stresses this somatic quality, arguing for an holistic view of humanity where the truths of body and soul cannot be divorced. The ultimate truth of the individual subject is thus beyond state control, and yet this subjective freedom is dependent on the rights guaranteed by the modern secular society. Also, while embodied, this spirituality is in fact ultimately discursive, originating with the Word (from the Christian perspective) and existing as a modern textual discourse, like theology, productive of and produced by its own brand of literature. Simultaneously, then, while spirituality is seen by many Westerners as something "other" to modern culture (we being "so out of touch with our true selves"), paradoxically it is also situated at the "heart" of modern culture; unlike theology—associated with rival institutions and control—spirituality is enshrined in hegemonic discourse as the favoured form of modern religion, enabled by provisions for the freedom of belief and speech, the marker of a "free" secular society. The modern sacred is not opposed to the secular so much as created by it. While the "holistic" claims of spirituality stress a somatic, corporate religious practice in opposition to an individual, linguistic belief system, it is apparent this dichotomy is not so clear cut. Individuality and textuality are integral to modern spirituality. The somatic quality of modern spirituality does not challenge hegemony, modern societies have not yet relinquished control over their subject's sexuality.

The privatisation of belief, the deinstitutionalisation and individualisation of truth, predates any such moves in the realm of sexuality.⁵ Even more than sex, the idea that "belief" should be a strictly private matter has contributed to the growth of Western modernity and yet modern scholarship tends to concentrate on sexuality. A pertinent example of this tendency is the understanding of women's writing that began with Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), namely, that women's writing played a major role in the establishment of middle-class hegemony by subsuming all socio-political differences into gender difference, translating them into questions of desire, desire that was coded as natural, universal, ahistorical and private.⁶ Women's writing, in short, was instrumental in creating modern subjectivity, and this subjectivity was primarily feminine. What is of particular interest to me is that this subjectivity is also understood as primarily secular. This aspect is more strongly brought out by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's excellent study of the rising middle-class: *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, also published in 1987. Unlike Armstrong, the authors locate the origins of domestic ideology in Evangelicalism but, as in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, the authors privilege women's texts, showing how women's writing in particular was instrumental in translating this religious ideology into middle class common-sense, a process that was coming to completion by the 1830s and '40s. Women thus played a crucial role as textual creators and disseminators of a bourgeois

⁵ Indeed, at the end of the eighteenth century, for example, theology and sexuality might be considered to be moving in opposite directions. Developing bourgeois ideology rendered both sex and belief as private matters, however as Foucault writes, "sex became a matter that required the social body as a whole, and virtually all of its individuals, to place themselves under surveillance" (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality; Volume 1: An Introduction* [New York: Vintage, 1990] 116). While Evangelicalism might be said to be following much the same trajectory in its emphasis on self-regulation, such self-surveillance was being gradually disassociated from State institutions and control. In the case of Methodism this process was complete: their early privileging of the individual heart as the guarantor of religious truth and emphasis on voluntary organisation having been followed by the final break with the Church of England. The coming century would see State confirmation of such decentralisation, with legislation that equated full citizenship with religious freedom, and moves towards disestablishment. In the case of sexuality, however, state control was intensifying, the regulation of sexuality, like the deregulation of belief, now being seen as crucial to the survival of the social body.

⁶ Nancy Armstrong, introduction, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) *passim*.

culture structured around sexual difference and ideologically based in Evangelicalism.⁷ Although biographical genres were preeminent in the period the authors discuss, women's literature was not just the expression of an individual religious voice (and "experience"), but a crucial expression and formulator of religion's relationship with society. Beginning with eighteenth-century Evangelical writers like Hannah More and William Cowper, the ideology of domesticity was disseminated through a number of Gramscian "organic intellectuals," the majority of whom were women, resurfacing nationally in a second period of social crisis in the 1830s and '40s with authors such as Sarah Ellis. To Davidoff and Hall, this is seen as the process of secularization: such ideology is now "common-sense." If secularization connotes a shift from sectarian association this is certainly the case, as it is with Evangelicalism as a whole. It would not be correct, however, to see the dissemination/democratisation of religious discourse and institutions throughout nineteenth-century society as the replacement of a religious culture with a secular one.

While obviously anyone concerned with tracing the rise of modernity is going to be concerned with the rise of a secular society, one might well be concerned that in these cases "secularization" is written too easily as a progression from an earlier stage of religiosity. The charting of such historical patterns is, I believe, an area where scholarly agendas can be seen to produce partisan histories. Many women's histories are shaped by "the rise of feminism," and while more and more feminist scholars are willing to allocate religion a major role, feminism's rise is still seen as dependent on the demise of religion as a social force; religion is read most favourably as a "language" whose use-by date is reached at some stage during the nineteenth century (when politics takes over).⁸ In this, such scholarship is echoing long-held biases of the kind that

⁷ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987). See especially ch. 3.

⁸ Philippa Levine's desire to identify "feminism" as distinct from both evangelicalism and liberalism, in that it "demonstrated the primacy of gender as the motor of oppression" (176), leads her to simultaneously acknowledge the importance of religion and limit it to an originative role, a "wellspring of feminist understanding and activity" (36). The chapter "Family, Faith and Politics" is in "Part One: Private Lives"; there are few mentions of religion in "Part Two: Public Commitment." Levine rejects parallels between philanthropy and feminism, arguing that while one relies on inequality,

produced, for example, J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God* and other histories of the rise of modernity that perhaps too easily assumed the synonymy of secular society and the secular, that is rational, individual.⁹ I have already stressed that the "secularity" of modern society is ambiguous: belief is considered a private matter yet all Western societies enshrine in public discourse beliefs regarding the sanctity of such privacy. And as Armstrong and Davidoff and Hall show, it was precisely the creation of a discourse dependent on the privatisation and universalisation of their particular religious views which ensured middle-class power. The secular rational world promoted by the early modern Western intellectual now seems less a description and more a prescription. From the late twentieth-century perspective it is perhaps more interesting to consider the maintenance, rather than the disappearance, of "God."

For histories like Armstrong's and Davidoff and Hall's, such issues as non-sectarianism (and related issues such as the espousal of a non-dogmatic belief system) are simply part of the privatisation and subsumption of the political into a scheme of desire, desire being understood according to Foucauldian notions of a sexuality constructed by discourse. Sexuality is not the only construction of desire and yet in

the other seeks to abolish it. See *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

⁹ J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap-Harvard UP, 1963). Miller locates the beginnings of modernity at the point when God is furthest from humanity:

in nineteenth-century England, Evangelicalism and the Catholic revival are belated attempts to stop the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of the sea of faith. When the old system of symbols binding man to God has finally evaporated man finds himself alone and in spiritual poverty. Modern times begin when man confronts his isolation, his separation from everything outside himself. (7)

Miller's five writers are read as tragic heroes of the modernist epic: responding to the experience of "terrifying absence" (1) with doomed and yet "heroic attempts to recover immanence in a world of transcendence" (15). Browning alone shows signs of the rejection of heaven/earth dualism which will lead to "that recovery of immanence which was to be the inner drama of twentieth-century literature" (359).

Wuthering Heights which Miller reads as writing Divine immanence and therefore erasing institutionalised religion (210-11) nevertheless leaves Emily Brontë (along with the other four) "stretched on the rack of a fading transcendentalism," having reached "such a precarious unity only by the most extravagant stratagems of the spirit" (359). Brontë's "unity" is invalidated because "A religious myth, to be valid, must become the form of a collective belief, and permeate the culture of a group. The validity of Emily Brontë's visions depends on their being kept private" (157). One might begin by asking in what sense a novel is private.

such histories it is promoted as dominant, to the degree that other forms of desire are negated. In order to rectify this situation and consider other constructions of desire one must reject the notion that the rise of the "secular" society is necessarily the same as the rise of the "Godless," or non-religious individual; the concept of an unambiguously "secular" society must also be interrogated. Rather than taking an approach like John Maynard's in *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion* (1993), where religious discourse on sexuality is elevated above other such discourses, which is in some respects merely an inversion of an already unsatisfactory situation, I assume the construction of desire, religious and sexual, in discourse.¹⁰ Such an assumption demands a more detailed investigation of non-sectarianism and non-dogmatism, both important features of "modern" religion, seeing them less as signs of the triumph of

¹⁰ John Maynard, *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993). Maynard's privileging of discourses of religion over those of sexuality results from his approach. Although Maynard writes in his introductory chapter of "religion and sexuality—those two great and highly artificial arenas of language in which humankind creates meaning for itself" (4), he attributes an uncomfortably pan-cultural and ahistorical psychological reality to both. Drawing on a blend of Freudianism and functionalist anthropology he defends the primacy of specific individual discourse (against the overgeneralising Foucauldian cultural account) by writing religion and sexuality as a narrative of personal psychological development: "the centrality at such a moment of adult-making ['the coming into adult sexual life of the adolescent' (21)] of the linking of religious and sexual rituals and meanings" (22). This reading has the effect of locating sexuality prior to discourse and largely negating the "artificiality" which Maynard states characterises religious and sexual discourse. Although such a reading legitimates Maynard's desire to privilege the individuals and their texts in his study of cultural discourses, it also raises two further related problems: the vexed question of the relationship of text and experience and the collapse of the desired specificity as Maynard draws a causal relationship between the subjective experience of the adolescent and resultant cultural expression: "All societies [...] build up cultural systems that articulate relations of religion and sex" (7). The problems of such a reading in accounting for cultural difference are perhaps revealed by Maynard's heavy reliance on non-Western examples at this point.

Critiquing the marginalization of religious discourse on sexuality and "a wholesale tendency to place secular discourses on sexuality at the center of Victorian thinking" (3), Maynard retaliates with marginalising tactics of his own. While admitting their "relevance to sexual issues" he nevertheless considers "gender difference, patriarchy, feminism, mothering and fathering" and so on as "related issues" and therefore unnecessary of consideration outside this mention in a footnote (319n). Maynard distinguishes between the act of sex and discourse of sexuality but not to the degree that would allow him to see that this distinction will inevitably centralise some of these issues, especially as regards women. In fact Maynard's subjects are all male, and sexuality is basically male desire. His work suggests the limitations of a phallogocentric phenomenological approach. Dismissing "related issues," locating his discussion in an overgeneralised psychological framework and anathematising secular discourses—"the pompous or fanciful men of science" (4)—Maynard fails to engage with both the complexity of discursive relations in the nineteenth century and extant scholarship that suggests more subtle and rewarding approaches to religious and sexual discourse, for example, Poovey's mapping of the relationship between discourse and "the skirmishes among various secular and religious institutions for the authority to legislate social behaviour." (See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* [London: Virago, 1989] 6.) Indeed, Maynard tends to resurrect a very Victorian dichotomy between physiology and discourse, natural desire versus cultural control, discourse inscribed as, and existing in, opposition to the body.

secularity than as part of the history of theology.¹¹ As "tenets" of belief, non-sectarianism, non-dogmatism and so forth, are conceived of and placed in opposition to unbelief, that is, as elements designed to further a social body governed by religious desire. That such beliefs now form part of modern religious subjectivity is a result of the privatisation and universalisation of theology, a process in which, as Armstrong and like scholars demonstrate, women's writing was instrumental.

I have already outlined the nature of modern religious subjectivity—"spirituality"—with its close relationship between body and text, what we could call its "somatic textuality." If my first reason for choosing "theology" was because of its discursivity, my second would be that "theology" is an essential area of consideration in any understanding of Western subjectivity. In focussing on theology, however, I will not be neglecting sexuality. Although theology specifically refers to notions of God, because of Christianity's idea of the *imago dei*, notions of God are implicated in formulations of sexuality, and such formulations, as Foucault and others argue, are central to an understanding of the modern subject and society. I am concerned with how such beliefs were implicated in the gendered subject—asking whether this religious subject, like Armstrong's generic individual, is primarily female—and whether they contributed to hegemony or whether such beliefs were part of a counter discourse.

That modern spirituality, rather than being inherently opposed to theology, has appropriated or inherited many of its characteristics, including its authority, reveals this question as a complex one. I will consider selected nineteenth-century texts as instrumental in producing the modern situation, being part of the process by which theology, the dominant epistemological discourse, was privatised and embodied and, conversely, the religious subject "textualized."

¹¹ I am not saying Davidoff and Hall, for example, imply that such elements were promoted by secular partisans, but simply that in accounting for the rise of modern secular society, such elements tend to be read in a somewhat Weberian fashion as part of this rise only, and not as theological and religious statements to be read as part of the history of modern religious subjectivity.

Nineteenth-century theology was classed and gendered, and increasingly a "new" professional discourse. It was also, of course, strongly contested: the language of an increasingly professionalised and specialised clergy, the epistemological authority of the "Queen of the Sciences" was being challenged by "the forces of secularism."¹² Control had in fact already escaped the Church of England; "talk about God" was becoming progressively "democratised" through the organs of the press, the nineteenth-century literary explosion and the "grass-roots" activities and publications of Evangelicalism in particular.¹³ Accompanying theology's fragmentation and

¹² See Alan Haig, *The Victorian Clergy* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); Brian Heeney, *A Different Kind of Gentleman: Parish Clergy as Professional Men in Early and Mid-Victorian England*, *Studies in British History and Culture* 5 (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1976); Anthony Russell, *The Clerical Profession* (London: SPCK, 1980). While "theology" became a professional marker across the Victorian clerical spectrum (see Russell, ch. 3 *passim*), one understood as divinely authorised (the "apostolic succession" of the Oxford movement for example), nineteenth-century clerical specialisation was in fact largely negative—occurring in response to the growth of other professions and the secular social structure (law, police, medicine, education etc.) which encroached on many of the clergy's traditional functions. Russell analyses the progressive contraction of these functions in considerable detail. Toleration and progressive disestablishment also meant the Anglican clergy were in competition with other claimants to the profession, and "not only did the clergy lack a monopoly of their distinctive function, but the very basis for their claim to legitimation—a religious world-view—was being eroded; whereas the secular professions rose on the strength of their unquestioned practical utility" (Haig 17). Haig believes this resulted in clerical "status anxiety" (Haig ch. 1: "Clergy Growth and Professionalization" 1-26). Theological knowledge as a clerical characteristic came into being in the nineteenth century in a very real sense: "Early in the century the state of theology at the ancient universities was feeble indeed. A very small part of the work for a regular degree, divinity was not taught systematically or seriously, and no special classes were required for ordinands [...]" (Heeney 98). Ordination required only that the ordinand be "learned in the Latin tongue and sufficiently instructed in the Scriptures" (Russell 45-46). The nineteenth century saw the uneven growth of training requirements and institutions, both inspired and hindered by denominational rivalry, with public criticism over the lack of clerical training peaking in the 1860s. Theology was not a regular degree subject at Oxford and Cambridge until the 1870s, and even then Cambridge's critical theology was in competition with Oxford's bastion of theological conservatism (Heeney 99). E. E. Kellet entertainingly demonstrates the small part theology actually played in the majority of Oxford students' lives by reminding us that while for some the Oxford movement had "convulsed Oxford as if it had been the Lisbon earthquake; that people spoke of nothing else, thought of nothing else, dreamed of nothing else. [...] A new *Tract for the Times* comes out, and the booksellers are besieged for copies of it as if it were a Dickens novel," the majority of the 800 or so students of the day were entirely untouched by the event and as far removed from the tortuous thoughts of Newman and Pusey as was possible to be: "doing what they ought not to have done, and leaving undone what they ought to have done, with perfect irresponsibility." See E. E. Kellett, *Religion and Life in the Early Victorian Age* 1938, Folcroft Library Editions (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft, 1976) 9, 12.

¹³ Paradoxically, Church attempts to retain ownership of theological discourse led to its wider dissemination; even the effective revival of Convocation (Canterbury in 1851, York in 1860) and Church Congresses (from 1861), while designed to centralise power, actually contributed to the spread of authority, as did the growth of non-graduate colleges designed to bolster professional credentials; other professional organs such as clerical societies and handbooks also contributed to the dissemination of theology, the speaking of the discourse beyond University confines and conservative control. (On the revival of Convocation see Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, 3rd ed., vol 2 [London: Black, 1971] 361.) V. H. Green, discussing the controversy over *Essays and Reviews* in the early '60s, notes the ways in which the Church itself both provoked and sanctioned media involvement in theology. The harassment of Jowett by Pusey and company opened the question of Church authority up to outraged

dissemination, as the discourse was spoken from new institutional bases, and in less bounded locations, an immanentist tone and textual emphasis increasingly predominated.

Victorian intellectuals were obsessed with text: as, under the German influence, they entered into an active critical engagement with the Bible, so they increasingly rejected scripture as providing a transparent window onto physical reality. For Benjamin Jowett a "literal" reading of scripture through the spectacles of church tradition resulted in wrong theology: "the only sacrifice, atonement, or satisfaction, with which Christ has to do, is a moral or spiritual one; not the pouring out of blood upon the earth."¹⁴ In *Essays and Reviews* (1860) Charles Goodwin carefully negated Genesis's claims to scientific veracity.¹⁵ Even F. D. Maurice—who never really entered into an active critical engagement with the Bible—had moved away from literalism. Claude Welch writes of Maurice that he judged scripture "to be revelatory as it relates men to God, not to itself or to the details of historical events." Maurice continued to believe that the Bible was a book of facts documenting God's acts in history, but the emphasis was on *theological* reality: "'the more firmly we believe the Bible to be from God' [he wrote] the less serious will be the sacrifice of a 'mere sentimental feeling which attaches a particular passage to a particular man.'"¹⁶ In direct proportion to the painstaking gaze that was fixed on it the master text took on an opacity. D. F. Strauss's attempt to resurrect the historical Jesus (*Leben Jesu* 1835) faltered in the clouds of mythology; Feuerbach discovered that the *Essence of*

media debate. The resulting loss of control of the discourse was then promptly compounded by Pusey enlisting the Low Church *Record* to pressure the church over *Essays and Reviews*, a move Green reads as a professional mistake: "Pusey was too naïve to see that he was being tempted to utilize the artifices of the secular world which he ordinarily repudiated." See V. H. Green, *Religion at Oxford and Cambridge: A History c.1160-c.1960* (London: SCM, 1964) 312.

¹⁴ Benjamin Jowett "On Atonement and Satisfaction" (1855), quoted in Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: A Survey from Coleridge to Gore*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1995) rpt. of *From Coleridge to Gore* 1971, 247. The classic exposition of Jowett's critical approach is, of course, "On the Interpretation of Scripture" in *Essays and Reviews* (1860).

¹⁵ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York: Macmillan, 1971) 212-16.

¹⁶ Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1: 1799-1870 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972) 256. Welch is quoting from Maurice's *Lincoln's Inn Sermons*, 6 vols (1891), 5:250.

Christianity (1841) was a veil of illusory self-projection.¹⁷ The body of scripture was dismembered, losing to some degree the vital integrity heretofore guaranteed it by its synecdochical relationship with the divine. At the hands of the scholars it was becoming fragmentary and partial, requiring it seemed, the touch of the same hands to make its "dry bones live." Human reading and writing of the text was becoming a necessary condition of the existence of Christian truth.

Sacrality no longer existed in a "noli me tangere" framework. Indeed from the time of the late eighteenth century Romantics, and earlier Evangelicals, sacrality had relied on "touch" to an immense degree: the incorporation of the text into the body whether reading the "Book of Nature" or the Gospels, sensuality, emotionalism and intimate, unmediated experience became necessary preconditions for the apprehension and realisation of the Truth. The production of personal testimony arising from this very physical encounter with the Divine and the products themselves—whether poem, "preaching" or tract—also took on this character. These linguistic and predominantly textual productions, were, of course, themselves designed to effect the experiences they described in the reader. Evangelical hymnody is a good example of this embodiment of theology/textualization of the religious subject: the Wesleys, for example, composed hymns that "proclaimed the theology of a church a-borning; hymns were to the Methodists what creeds were to the Established Church"¹⁸; simultaneously, evangelical hymns also encapsulated the subjective, and often very physical experience of salvation. At the opposite end of the spectrum from Jowett, evangelical hymnody reasserted the physical sufferings of Christ at Calvary—complete with blood and gore—and the intense and specific physicality of the faith shared by the singers, as this hymn (republished at the end of the nineteenth century) demonstrates:

¹⁷ Both these works were introduced to the Victorians by Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot); her translations were published in 1846 and 1854 respectively.

¹⁸ Susan S. Tamke, *Make a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord: Hymns as a Reflection of Victorian Social Attitudes* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1978) 24.

And if with lively faith we view
 His dying toil and smart,
 And hear Him say, "It was for you!"
 This breaks the stony heart.

A heavenly joy His words convey;
 The bowels strangely move;
 We blush, and melt, and faint away,
 O'erwhelmed with His love.¹⁹

Evangelical theology was embodied theology, knowledge proved by subjective experience and bodily sensation. Evangelical bodies were inscribed, in them scripture lived viscerally; the Evangelical body was a "proof-text." This progression from the read body of the text to the textualized body can also be seen in the case of F. D. Maurice, "perhaps the most influential English theologian of the nineteenth-century."²⁰ Maurice defined theology as the knowledge of God, systematic theology as contrary to revelation, and "the highest theology being that most closely connected with 'the

¹⁹ Thomas Bradbury, "Exceeding Precious is My Lord" stanzas 3-4. *Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Elect of God* 3rd ed. 1891. Quoted in Tamke 39.

²⁰ Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought* 87. Livingston's judgement occurs in the context of ascertaining Coleridgean influence on British theology; part of Maurice's influence lies in his "popularisation" of Coleridgean ideas. Reardon considers Maurice "arguably the most original theological thinker that the nineteenth century produced in [England]," limiting this judgement to "theology proper," Maurice not being known for his engagement with critical biblical study. See Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age*, 118, 132. In both cases "nineteenth-century" might be best understood as "Victorian." Welch writes that despite the wildly varying estimates of Maurice, he "has come increasingly to be recognized as the most seminal theological mind (with the possible exception of John Henry Newman) in mid-nineteenth-century Britain" (Welch, *Protestant Thought* 241-42). This was certainly a view held by many of Maurice's contemporaries. In 1853 Elizabeth Gaskell wrote of

instances of people who have owed more than they can well speak of without breaking down to Mr Maurice's writings or Mr Maurice's self.—"Influence" is such a difficult thing to trace and define; the most powerful is so like the great powers of nature, so imperceptible in its working that it almost seems to me as if too much talking about it vulgarized it. There is no doubt whatever it seems to me of the *fact*—that Mr Maurice has more influence over the more thoughtful portion of the English people than any one else I know of [...]. ("To F. J. Furnivall," 3 Dec. 1853, letter 172 of *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard [Manchester: Manchester UP, 1966] 256-57)

commonest practical life."²¹ Maurice's own theology shifted out of an elite institution into the common streets of his Settlement philosophy. While he continued to hold that theology involved reason, this was not to be opposed to lived experience. Countless Victorians were involved in Philanthropy, another version of lived theology. The post-millennialist tenor of the time stressed immanence and incarnation.²²

The somatic and corporate nature of this theology was initially anathematised in hegemonic discourse. Critiques of Methodist enthusiasm are well known,²³ and Evangelicals more generally suffered antipathy, as the title alone of Valentine Cunningham's "Everywhere Spoken Against" makes clear. No longer a thing "set apart," the dissemination of divine textuality kept pace^{with} (or to some degree heralded) the process of social democratisation. The truth of the text became the ideological property of advocates of social change, and as the nineteenth century progressed and Evangelical ideology triumphed, it became the property of the "winners": a justification of and a tool to maintain the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. The "Family Bible," its central location (in that bourgeois power-house, the family home) and attendant rituals (family prayers read by pater familias to his dependants) embodied the text in middle-class discourse and institutions. As well as the text as a totemic object—the embodiment of Truth nicely bound in Moroccan leather conferring grace and membership on its possessors—the performance of the text, which always began with the reading and *writing* of it in

²¹ Reardon 122.

²² Clement C. J. Webb's *A Study of Religious Thought in England from 1850* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933) traces what he calls the "immanentist tendency" (10) in religious philosophy up to the first World War. But this emphasis can also be seen across the culture: from specific instances such as the Christ-like heroes of novels like Mrs Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888), struggling to bring about heaven on earth, through to the millions of Bibles produced to realise Evangelical post-millennial faith in world conversion, and the more general ethos of self-improvement through one's own efforts espoused in particular by the middle-classes, which ethos would ensure the eventual perfect society. Apostolic succession (mentioned above, n12) is an example of the incarnational emphasis in the Anglo-Catholic sphere, as is, more indirectly perhaps, the eventual emphasis on pastoral theology—the cleric as shepherd rather than scholar—within the clerical profession (see Heeney, *A Different Kind of Gentleman*).

²³ A particularly apposite example is provided by Sydney Smith (ironically in the context of criticising the "dignified tameness" of his fellow Anglican clergymen in 1801): "the crowd are feasting on ungrammatical fervour, and illiterate animation in the crumbling hovels of Methodists." Quoted in Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-90*, Longman Literature in English Ser. (London: Longman, 1993) 67.

the first instance, made it a metonym for middle-class culture. As object it symbolised power, knowledge, respectability—in short, Civilisation. The "fleshing out" of the text was accomplished not by the Divine but the human Word, whether this included the direct use of the Bible as a teaching aid in ragged schools, its reading in chapel and parlour, its translation into Maori, its transfiguration into a popular hymn by Charles Wesley or Felicia Hemans, a devotional poem by Keble or Rossetti, the retelling and attempt to reproduce its "idea" in one of the myriad "Lives of Jesus," Josephine Butler's writings on prostitution, or Mrs Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere*.

But the reproduction of the Mastertext, even when engaged in furthering middle-class and patriarchal hegemony, put, as it were, the means of theological production into the hands of subaltern groups, many of whom were more likely to embody the text in the less elite textual forms. Though few women wrote theological treatises women were nonetheless involved in the "fleshing out" of the text as the instances I have just given attest. Much of this "ideological work" was located within a feminized literary tradition that had its origin in hymns, tracts and other "religious" genres.²⁴ This appropriation of the means of theological production was of course resisted and attempts made to "cleanse" Truth discourse from the polluting touch of subaltern groups. Newly developing textual disciplines tried to monitor the situation, creating new categories in order to rework hierarchies. Matthew Arnold, himself wresting theology from institutional control, used ridicule to back his own claims to ownership, stigmatising Evangelicals as Philistines. As far as gender went, Ruskin's almost hysterical depiction of shrieking women who "plunge headlong, and without one thought of incompetency, into that science in which the greatest men have trembled," illustrates the strength of resistance to female engagement in the discourse.²⁵

²⁴ See Margaret Maison "Thine, only Thine!" Women Hymn Writers in Britain, 1760-1835," *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930*, ed. Gail Malmgreen (London: Croom Helm, 1986) 11-40; and Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes* ch. 2.

²⁵ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1867-68), and John Ruskin "Sesame and Lilies," (1865). Theology was to be the only subject exempted from Ruskin's ideal feminine education. See *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, vol. 18 (London: Allen; New York: Longmans, 1905) 127-28.

Women's sphere, as Ruskin outlined, was domesticity. Women were the spiritual heart of the domestic temple, their work to maintain Christianity. They were to do this not by theological investigation but by engaging in their "natural" feminine tasks. One of these tasks was needlework, which, as Roszika Parker writes, "occupied a key place in the exploration of what it meant to be a woman in the middle class."²⁶ Needlework was a desirable, even necessary, natural physical expression of natural piety; in one of her conduct books Sarah Ellis linked needlework with female moral influence: "the feminine qualification of being able to use to hand willingly and well, has a great deal to do with the moral influence of women."²⁷ Parker notes that the embroiderer could be criticised if she mistook her humble labour for art;²⁸ there were, however, other ways in which the embroiderer could commit heresy. The themes chosen by the embroiderers matched the morality of the activity itself: countless embodiments of Biblical text and illustration were worked in Berlin wool. But caution had to be exercised even here that one did not overstep the bounds of feminine modesty: a High Church correspondent to an 1861 magazine

asked for a pattern of "Our Saviour on the Cross, with ground almost black, the body a beautiful flesh colour and blood streaming from wounds most natural." The answer was that it was not right to publish such things in a magazine as "these pictures are to be preserved in the inner most recesses of the home and are not to be trifled with or made common."²⁹

²⁶ Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 151.

²⁷ Quoted in Parker 153.

²⁸ "As long as the Victorian women overtly fulfilled the feminine ideal of sensitivity and service with their embroidery, stitching selflessly for home and husband, they could expect their work to be regarded with chivalrous deference. Only if they became 'selfishly' absorbed in their work did they encounter mockery" (Parker 215).

²⁹ Molly G. Proctor, *Victorian Canvas Work: Berlin Wool Work* (London: Batsford, 1972) 97.

The correspondent's undisguised delight in the physicality of the Crucifixion—here expressed in aesthetic terms—is strongly reminiscent of Evangelical hymnody. The theological propriety of a High Churchwoman's desire for such physicality in itself is not questioned, nor is the feminine propriety of displaying such an image *privately*. The place for such embodied theology is the inner sanctum of the home, and this most private of places is also, of course, woman's domain, Ruskin's "sacred place, a vestal temple."³⁰ Syntactically the implied vulgarity—or more precisely unfemininity—of public display is made to infect the correspondent's desire to *reproduce* such an image in a feminine form. For a woman's hands and needle to render the intimacies of the sacred body—to embody theology, to flesh-out the text, to textualize as textile—is a "trifling with" and "making common" of sacred things. A few years later Ruskin would explicitly write the feminine theological touch as "profane," ranting against the way domestic women "dare to turn the Household Gods of Christianity into ugly idols of their own;—spiritual dolls, for them to dress according to their caprice."³¹ In fact this feminine "fabrication" of the Divine was "common" in both senses of the term: "[One Mrs Lowe noted that] 'Pleasing little horrors such as *Head of the Saviour in His Agony* and the Virgin with all her tortured mother-love in her eyes were considered fit ornaments for the drawing room.'"³²

With these ambiguously "fit ornaments" properly domestic women were "writing" a reproductive relationship between the feminine and the divine into popular theological discourse. This relationship was one produced by feminine desire and industry and often written as maternal in terms of subject matter and view point, as Mrs. Lowe's prototypical examples suggest (and as one might expect in an age when even the feminist Frances Power Cobbe defined women as "Human Beings of the Mother Sex").³³ The bourgeois housewife and her Immaculate (since 1854)

³⁰ Ruskin 122.

³¹ Ruskin 127-28.

³² Proctor 97.

³³ From the *Duties of Women* (1881), quoted in Dorothy Mermin, *Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880*, Women of Letters (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 125.

counterpart share the maternal gaze: the intimate, implicated maternal knowledge of suffering and the body (not just the physical form but its processes and fluids). The domestic woman, appropriating male images for her feminine arts and drawing-room, had also appropriated central theological meanings and scriptural texts. In Lowe's examples appropriation also suggests rewriting: a privileging of the maternal gaze and knowledge, figuring the moment of Atonement as the exclusive and yet universal (cosmic) relationship of mother and child.³⁴

The effect of such domestic rewriting is a theological valorisation of the feminine and the body occurring in the private, feminine space. How are we to read such an "effect"? Its "privacy"—its "femininity"—is in some ways ambiguous. In its stress on embodied theology it is clearly connected to wider theological discourse, in particular Evangelical discourse, a discourse that wrote the private ambiguously. As women became increasingly defined by domesticity and limited to the private, domesticity was itself widened to incorporate society.³⁵ Domestic ideology constituted the social body as a corporation of domestic units, its matrix as the "natural" maternal body, a body that, as we have already noted, births the larger Christian body. If the

³⁴ F. K. Prochaska, in *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), reads the popularity of such images as straightforward character identification: Foot of the Cross scenes are a central motif, for example, because they affirm women's closeness to Christ, women as bringers of the good news of resurrection, the solidarity of women, and a special female ministry to the dying. I do not disagree with Prochaska's assessment that scripture rather than theology was the primary religious source and legitimation for women's philanthropic activities, but I believe that we need to read this as a dialectical process, not a closed narrative. Women's reading of these representations did not end with imitation of Christ or Mary. To accept this is to accept a naïve view of the reader. In my view women's reproduction of these sources inevitably involves theology. Margaret Homans, in *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986), considers cases where women writers' transmission of male words, especially of the Word, is subversive despite its seeming legitimacy (see ch. 7, "Bearing the Word as Nineteenth-Century Ideology," 153-88 passim). She also suggests that this reproduction of male words is what enables the ostensibly paradoxical virgin mother (in ideology and praxis). Homans writes that Catholic theology and "Angel in the House" ideology alike stressed the aphysical nature of maternity and women's bodies (157). This spiritualised/disembodied feminine does not negate the Aristotelian understanding of the material nature of the feminine, however, both views coexist "through their common assumption that the mother is merely transmitter of a father's (or Father's) word or seed" (158). In Lowe's examples the insistent foregrounding of the physical that takes place through the reproduction of male discourse reveals the somatic grounding of spirit and theology.

³⁵ See, for example, Anne Summers, "A Home from Home—Women's Philanthropic Work in the Nineteenth Century," *Fit Work For Women*, ed. Sandra Burman (New York: St. Martin's, 1979) 33-63.

Evangelical body is constituted as a "proof-text," domestic ideology wrote the maternal body as the proof-text *par excellence*, a text designed to provoke religious desire in her "reader":

The best things that the best believe

Are in her face so kindly writ

The faithless, seeing her, conceive,

Not only heaven, but hope of it;

(Coventry Patmore, *Angel in the House*, part 1, book 1, canto iv, preludes 1)³⁶

The private, feminine space is the focus of public surveillance precisely because what Poovey calls "a binary model of difference articulated upon sex" was crucial to middle-class hegemony.³⁷ Orthodox text she may be, but the maternal body is both written and writes and as textualized religious *subject*, giving shape to religious desire with words, the feminine traverses boundaries: of gender, of literature (already situated on the boundary of public and private),³⁸ between sacred and secular and body and soul. Potentially the process was one of resistance to dominant discourse; it was also an essential element of dominant discourse.

The centrality of the virgin mother to this maternal economy also blurred theological boundaries. That the integrity of the nineteenth-century Protestant body was threatened by female purity and a maternal religion role, both factors essential to its own constitution, shows just how fragile the boundaries were perceived to be. Popular anti-Catholicism ensured that these boundaries were policed; nevertheless the Protestant

³⁶ Coventry Patmore, *Angel in the House*, vol. 1, 1854-56 (London: Macmillan, 1863) 50.

³⁷ Poovey, *Uneven Developments* 6.

³⁸ Christine L. Krueger, in *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), shows how at an early stage in the history of this literature the boundary was in fact breached with the public voice of eighteenth-century Methodist women preachers. Krueger charts a "preaching tradition" that links these women with nineteenth-century writers like Gaskell, and effectively ends its development with George Eliot. Krueger's work will be discussed in chapter one.

appropriation of the Madonna contributed to an increasingly non-sectarian discourse, a discourse which thus problematized the maternal body, potentially situating it beyond the confines of the earthly patriarchal family. The negative reaction to Anglo-Catholic convents and in particular the persecution of the Mother Superior of the Devonport community, Priscilla Lydia Sellon, demonstrate how these blurrings of theological and gender boundaries could be read as transgressive from the point of view of those attempting to maintain the theological and patriarchal "upper-hand." Sellon's autonomous role as Mother Superior—the virgin mother of a community of sisters—was seen as destroying the "natural"—Protestant and patriarchal—family.³⁹ In spite of Sellon's experience, issues associated with the phenomenon of the non-sectarian virgin mother provide an example of the "positive" nature of non-sectarian discourse, demonstrating that non-sectarianism is not simply a negation or absence: elements can be found located in decidedly sectarian locations (the High Church convent, for example) and in this respect it is clearly not a manifestation of secularization. Non-sectarian discourse does not simply deny, it formulates and its formulations also have a material dimension: in its manifestation as a new autonomous role for Protestant women, the non-sectarian virgin mother impacts on culture and contributes to sociological change.

"Non-sectarian" discourse then, can be read as a dialect of theological discourse rather than as a straightforward symptom of secularization. Clearly the relationship between theological discourse (in the broad sense in which I am employing it) and secularization as an historical process is a complex one. Just as clearly, this is not a relationship that can be traced by simplistically reducing theology and secularization—as a cultural discourse and an historical process—to the status of competing ideologies;

³⁹ For Marian worship in the 1860s see Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883*, vol. 2 (New York: Garland, 1983) 195ff. For prejudice against Sellon and convents in general, see Dale A. Johnson, *Women in English Religion, 1700-1925*, *Studies in Women and Religion* 10 (New York: Mellen, 1983) 176-77 and the excerpt from W. M. Colles, "Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of Misery: or, Miss Sellon in the Family" (1852), Johnson 179-81. Colles "reveals" the "Sellon system" as an anti-family, committed to the destruction of the "natural" family.

that is a separate matter. This study, in its attempts to read theological discourse in literature, continually reads against such a slippage. My approach, although dependent on the contextualised close readings of literary texts, is neither to excavate the literary remains of theological minutiae, nor exhaustively match theological dogma and literary trope in the kind of exercise undertaken by Michael Wheeler in his *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*.⁴⁰ Indeed Garrett Stewart's review of Wheeler's work, while acknowledging it as "the most sustained attempt in print to map the intricacies of hermeneutical and theological debate upon the spiritual cruxes (obvious or latent) of landmark Victorian poems and novels," also sees it as revealing the problematic "gap" between textual studies and social studies which perpetuates "the persistent gulf between social practice, individually and collectively plotted, and the mastertexts of a culture [...]." Wheeler's work, Stewart believes, also highlights the "still vexed textual gap between literary language and the adjacent cultural idioms (here theological) with which, but also against which, both poetry and fiction work by resonating."⁴¹ Stewart finds a too easy migration of motifs from the Christian to the secular worldview:

his [Wheeler's] reading remains locked within the binary opposition (and lurking hierarchy) of the sacred and profane, even as he sees major literary texts transgressing or renegotiating the distinction. [...] what Victorian scholarship must nonetheless continue to do is to chart the systemic mutation, not just contextual migration, of public discourses [...] into what Hayden White has taken to calling "the content of the form" of literary practice. In the religious domain, this amounts not to the straightforward secularization of credo into theme so much as to its intertextual transfiguration, the diffusion of its axioms and vocabularies

⁴⁰ Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990).

⁴¹ Garrett Stewart, rev. of *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, by Michael Wheeler, *Victorian Studies* 35 (Spring 1992) 335, 336. While Stewart praises Wheeler's work as "definitive and invaluable" (336), Wheeler doesn't cover feminine genres, authors or texts in detail: part 2 looks at Tennyson, Dickens, Newman and Hopkins.

within the circuit of another discourse, where the theological becomes literary precisely by being deliteralized. (337)

In chapter one I will analyse the current state of theology and literature studies further, identifying some major approaches and focussing on the issues raised by "secular" and "theological" partisanship. The remainder of my study will go some way to answering Garrett Stewart's challenge by charting the "systemic mutation" of public discourse, the embodiment of theology and the rise of the textualized religious subject, in the texts of Margaret Oliphant (1828-97) and Dinah Mulock Craik (1826-87). Craik and Oliphant were both popular and prolific public writers, opposed to "intellectual" challenges to faith, and advocates and writers of a non-sectarian Christianity. Born within a few years of each other, they both published their first novels in 1849. Both are examples of the new professional nineteenth-century woman, and both had to make their own way, fighting to establish themselves and their right to speak authoritatively. They won this right and an improved social position through their own literary labours, thus they could be read as creators of, and participants in, middle-class cultural hegemony.

Both authors exercised their influence from a number of literary platforms, including the culturally dominant periodical press. Oliphant, for example, a successful and prolific writer of fiction and non-fiction under her own name, also wrote anonymously for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, an association that began in 1852 and only ended with her death in 1897. As *Blackwood's* "general utility woman" she was by far the most prolific of the Victorian female periodical writers: over the years producing countless reviews (as well as serial fiction) and sometimes writing as much as one third of the current issue of the magazine. Although Oliphant never gained the editorship she felt she had earned, her immense and anonymous critical contributions to a periodical "masculine in tone and intended audience"⁴² ensured her sphere of

⁴² Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself" A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 245, 246.

influence was not constrained within the limits dictated by Victorian ideologies of gender.

Following the enormous success of the novel *John Halifax, Gentleman* in 1856, Craik, too, became an influential public voice, in demand "for essays on serious subjects and social causes." Her next work, the conduct book *A Woman's Thoughts about Women* (1858), was a collection of essays first published in *Chambers's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1857. Sally Mitchell writes: "The Author of *John Halifax*' was a public figure with a stature equaled [sic] by few women of her generation, who could speak her thoughts with the assurance that they would be read and regarded because she had written them."⁴³ Anonymity was a pose rather than a disguise; Craik's identity was known and thus, unlike Oliphant, her critical voice was labelled early on as a specifically feminine voice.

Craik's highly influential *John Halifax* is the quintessential non-sectarian, middle-class text (one it is said Oliphant helped edit, she certainly facilitated Craik's initial meeting with the publisher).⁴⁴ Oliphant's biggest success was in the early 1860s with *Salem Chapel*, one of her popular *Chronicles of Carlingford* series and a novel in which the relationship between class and religious denomination is treated ironically. In chapter two I read these two best-selling mid-century works as paradigmatic: as representative of the mid-century non-sectarian woman's text, engaged in both the privatisation and universalisation of theology and opposed to secularization. I consider each text's particular dialogue with secularity, specifically in its representation as melodrama, and the related issue of hegemony. Having identified some of the major characteristics and concerns of the non-sectarian text, the remaining chapters are

⁴³ Sally Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik*, Twayne's English Authors Ser. 364 (Boston: Twayne, 1983) 13 and 99.

⁴⁴ For Oliphant's account of this transaction see *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant: The Complete Text*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 101-02. For a fuller estimate of Oliphant and Craik's relationship see 167n42.

designed to enable some historical analysis and comparison between the mid- and late-Victorian periods, represented by Craik and Oliphant respectively.⁴⁵

Both authors put more store by their less popular works (although in neither case does this imply unpopularity), and in each case these were experimental religious works: Craik's domestic novel *A Life for a Life* (1859) and Oliphant's fantasy novella *A Beleaguered City* (1880). In chapter three I consider the relationship between contemporary theological and gender discourses expressed in these works, in both cases texts located at crucial points in the history of the "crisis of faith." I concentrate specifically on representations of the Atonement, a theological narrative that focusses on the nature of the relationship between the body and the text and that was central to nineteenth-century religious change.

While the final two chapters treat Craik and Oliphant separately, they are also designed to be read in relation to one another. Chapters four and five consider the use of "fairy" and "fantasy" respectively, "alternative" religious genres or modes whose relationship to hegemony has been much disputed. Chapter four analyses Craik's political and theological use of "fairy" in her mid-century novel *Olive* (1850). While "fairy" is considered historically in this chapter, chapter five emphasises "fantasy" as part of an attempt to provide a simultaneously "gynocritical" and aesthetic reading of a cluster of short late-century texts by Oliphant.⁴⁶ The chapter considers the relationship of Victorian feminine "fancy" to the *fin de siècle*, focussing on the notion of an "idiomatic" Christianity. Read together, chapters four and five frame the historical parameters of the thesis as a whole, from 1850 to the turn of the century and the dawning of the modern. The conclusion revisits the readings developed throughout the thesis and returns to the issue of secularization and the modern subject, suggesting

⁴⁵ Although Craik continued to write until the year of her death, she published two fifths of her novels in the decade 1849-59, a period that comprises a quarter of her literary career and includes her most important novels. What Sally Mitchell describes as Craik's last full-length novel, *Young Mrs. Jardine*, was serialised in 1879 (*Dinah Mulock Craik* no pag.), the end of what has been considered "the Victorian age proper" (Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas: A Companion for the Modern Reader of Victorian Literature* [New York: Norton, 1973] 16).

⁴⁶ Toril Moi discusses Elaine Showalter's theory of "gynocritics" and its empirical emphasis on woman's experience at the expense of the text itself. See Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1985) 75-79.

more fruitful ways to read the relationship between theological discourse and the nineteenth-century woman writer's "style."

Chapter One: Reading Literature and Theology¹

[I]t may be that this is only the beginning, a point where a genuine and unforced merging of the old categories of nature and supernature, God and man and world, may take place, just as it so sweetly and painfully happened, and still happens, beyond all our comprehension, two millennia ago as now, in Christ and on the Cross. (Colin Manlove, *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present* [Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 1992] 302)

In the twentieth century, mainstream Western scholarship has been a self-consciously secular discourse; despite this, there have always been academic speakers of a non-secular discourse. Such discourse has, of course, been spoken from theological institutions; it has also, however, been implicit in the rise of English as a discipline and influenced Women's Studies, especially in its earlier stages. In all its locations it has been bound up with issues of epistemological hegemony—both academic and theological—and this has shaped its methodologies. If "mainstream" scholarship is secular, this situates non-secular scholarship as the "marginal," though to distinguish them thus is to some degree misleading. While useful where it illuminates points of difference, and therefore allows for the creation of a critical dialogue, such nomenclature can also disguise the points of agreement and elide the uneasy formulation of sacred and secular that in fact characterises Western hegemonic discourse (as noted above in the introduction) and, more specifically, the mainstream academic disciplines. Non-secular discourse has been complicit in the rise of avowedly "secular" disciplines, and many of the desires and consequent problems of non-secular work are also evident in the "mainstream." I have already generally indicated the problems secular scholarship has had with reading theology and literature and will consider this further

¹ Portions of this chapter were originally delivered to the 1992 New Zealand Association for the Study of Religions Conference held in Wellington, New Zealand. I have retained some aspects of that style of delivery.

later in the chapter. Firstly however, I want to consider the relevance of "non-secular" scholarship to my thesis. If nothing more, such work, by working against the secular grain, has kept the "sacred" in currency. The relationship of non-secular scholarship to modern non-secular discourse more generally is the first of my concerns here and forms a kind of background to the chapter. As the involvement with English Literature attests, such scholarship contributes to the textuality of modern religion and has genealogical links with the nineteenth century. The second and more prominent consideration is why such scholarship has, like much secular scholarship, been inadequate in reading theology and literature, particularly that by women. This involves an interrogation of its constructions of the feminine. In reference to my overall aim I will demonstrate that both these considerations are, in fact, interdependent.

1. Manlove and Christian Fantasy

Beginning from the margins, then, I want to introduce this close relationship through a discussion of Colin Manlove's *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present*. *Christian Fantasy* was published in 1992, the cinquicentennial of Europe's discovery of the new world.² That the reader should regard this as more than the accidental convergence of publishing mechanics and political ritual is immediately indicated by the cover illustration: *The Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus*, Salvador Dali's surreal representation of 1492. As the author's primary focus is on neither American works nor the visual arts (and if we dismiss marketing strategies as contributory but not in themselves sufficient reason), the connection between choice of cover and contents is worth exploring.

The only figure that might possibly be female in this highly symbolic "moment" in the history of colonisation is a Marian figure. Situated in the left foreground of the work, her back to the sea, she floats above the shores of the "new world," appearing at

² Colin Manlove, *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present* (Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 1992).

once as emblem (of Christianity) and real presence. While her train drapes itself over the leg of one of the partially nude male standard bearers, she herself is modestly shrouded in voluminous garments, only her face and hands visible. Eschewing the world of flesh her desire is directed toward that of the spirit: with clasped hands she lifts her eyes upward toward one of the crosses borne by the young men. The Christian element of the colonial enterprise, while mediated through the disembodied feminine, is clearly grounded on the physical plane by young and virile masculinity.

Manlove's critical project is to attempt "to find out the variety" of, and he is "intrigued" by the "rarity" of, "Christian fantasy" (ix), that is, "a fiction dealing with the Christian supernatural, often in an imagined world" (5). "A certain shyness or modesty perhaps often overcame the more sophisticated Christian confronted with the possibility of dramatizing heaven," writes the author (7). Surprisingly, nineteenth-century women appear to have comprised part of this decorous yet sophisticated group: the author's coverage of Victorian women writers extends to *very* brief mentions of Marie Corelli and Mary Shelley (a sentence and a subclause respectively) plus the "obligatory" mention of George Eliot, none of the three perfect "ladies" it is true.³ Possibly the departure of "modesty" as a prerequisite for twentieth-century "sophisticated" womanhood accounts for the appearance of a number of modern women writers.

Post-Romantic fantasy "ceases to be written by the dominant literary figures: it is now the product of minor, and often eccentric writers" (158). Given the fact that a number of minor nineteenth-century women writers produced such literature, marginalization operates here through a kind of double insult. What Ann Douglas called "consolation literature"—renditions of the afterlife ostensibly designed to console the mourner and often embodying social critiques—was a popular genre particularly in North America,⁴ which locus of production, however, functions as such a strangely

³ Marie Corelli wrote "sensational" literature, inspired by the spiritualist craze at mid-century.

Mary Shelley and George Eliot, as is well known, transgressed feminine bounds by rejecting paternal authority (temporarily at least) and patriarchal societal norms more generally in their respective connubial arrangements.

⁴ "This enormously popular genre included obituary poems and memoirs, mourner's manuals, prayer guidebooks, hymns, and books about heaven" and "characteristic of most" was "an explicitly or implicitly hostile protest against the competitive, aggressive, non-familial society [...]." The genre

enveloping absence in this work. The "angel in the house" has been displaced by the disembodied muse of colonisation and also, in a sense, by John Bull himself; the best known "fantasies" are British, alleges the author, and his purpose is "not to recount a history [of fantasy], but to consider the most significant."⁵

That the prominent presence of Britain is reliant on the foregrounded absence of America suggests other issues. If Dali's work is, like the textual fantasies discussed, an attempt "to render a new picture of Christian truth" (9), what are the implications of this "new picture"? The author presents his own work as an exploration of *terra nova*, *terra incognita*, and almost replicates the "legal fiction" *terra nullius*. Dali's muse inspires not only Columbus's colonial enterprise but the author's foray into virgin territory, underexploited by writer and critic alike and thus a veritable critic's El Dorado, wealthy in rare commodities.⁶

The scholarly enterprise is of course itself a form of colonisation; the search for El Dorado is a greed all scholars suffer from. Similarly the scholarly endeavour could be said to share with Christian colonisation the desire for interpretative hegemony. Here, however, the connections are tighter. Nostalgia is foregrounded, both by the cover art which resonates within its paradoxical social context of celebrating and commemorating the age of discovery (also an age of Christian hegemony) in the age of decolonisation, and in the text, self-consciously elegiac, which mourns the replacement

was also popular in England where Elizabeth Phelps's "fictionalized mourning manual," *The Gates Ajar* (1868), caused an even greater sensation than it had in America, where it was a best-seller. In the mid-1860s the Englishman Peter Branks's *Heaven Our Home* and *Life in Heaven* were immensely popular in England. See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1978) 201, 203, and 371n6. As well as the kind of supernatural literature that Oliphant wrote (especially her "Little Pilgrim" series), Margaret Maison mentions English women undertaking "such fascinating literary genres as letters from the dead to the living." See "Thine, only Thine! Women Hymn Writers in Britain, 1760-1835," *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930*, ed. Gail Malmgreen (London: Croom Helm, 1986) 12. Also compare Manlove's "rarity" with the "flurry of publications" both fictional and theological that described heaven, noted by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang in *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 228. Ann Douglas is herself scathing of such literature (and other literary efforts by the nineteenth century North American "clerical-feminine" alliance), like Manlove equating the marginal with mediocrity (168-69).

⁵ Manlove 8. The book is prefaced with self-absolution: "I leave this book with a sense that the story has many more elements than I have covered [...]. There will doubtless be authors I have missed out—I have attempted only a survey of the main figures [...]" (ix).

⁶ The paucity of critical works on Christian literature in general is noted, as well as the specific lack of works on Christian fantasy (Manlove 7).

of Christian fantasy with its secular counterpart science fiction: "The loss is great" (11). Donning the prophet's mantle, the author calls for contemporary renditions of a theocentric heaven, looking particularly to non-Western locations as potential sites of production: "Perhaps before long there will be another great 'Christian fantasy,' from Bolivia or Zaire or Beirut" (11). Here, a form of "Orientalism" is at work, transcending the text's ostensible limitation to (partial) analysis of a minor genre. Embedded in the historical paradox evoked by 1992, the text is at once a commemoration of the past preeminence of the Old World, for which Britain functions synecdochically,⁷ and a lament for the secularization of the Western imagination. As Dali's presiding muse looks to the new world as a site of conquest for the old, *Christian Fantasy* looks to the "other" to satisfy its own lack. Certainly Christianity's major cultural bases (numerically) are now outside the Western world but Christian "fantasy" born of such cultures seems as likely to employ the language of liberation theology: concerned with heaven on earth and employing cultural idioms and understandings such as are likely to overstretch our author's narrow category.⁸

Dali's work is a fantasy, a surreal rendition of the historical moment. Manlove's fantasy of fantasies is similarly transhistorical. Discussion of the Victorian period, an age which saw the gradual demise of supernaturalism, is strangely limited to discussions of works which involve the Christian supernatural, those demonstrative of "a defensive reaction" (162). One might realistically expect that a work which sets out to elucidate attempts "to render a new picture of Christian truth" might demonstrate some interest in "fantasies" which sought a new and more appropriate language to deal

⁷ Out of eighteen chapters only three concentrate exclusively on non-British material: the French *Queste del Saint Graal*, Dante and Swedenborg.

⁸ In the "new world" Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz rejects fantasy for praxis: "Hispanic women protesting the lack of city services in the South Bronx, emptying a bag of trash on the desk of the city official who could order the garbage to be picked up more frequently in the area where the women live—that is doing Hispanic women's liberation theology." See Ursula King ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London: SPCK; Orbis, 1994) 90-91. On the other hand, Aruna Gnanadason, from India, writes of how "Shakti, the feminine energy force, our liberator God, has re-emerged in splendour—to her we turn for a new vision of a new world order" (King 360). The Korean theologian Chung Hyun Kyung's "new picture" has the goddess of compassion Kwan Yin as the Holy Spirit, and perhaps also a feminine image of Christ (King 394).

with a demythologised world. Such a "new language" would be silenced by the circumscribed boundaries of a rigidly supernatural definition of Christian fantasy. And, as noted above, the attenuated category is as little likely to accurately incorporate contemporary developments.

Manlove needs this rigid genre, however, in order to reach the point of the textual incarnation for which he yearns (see chapter epigraph). The nostalgic desire for a "bounded universe" feeds a history of the Word which, in the form of "Christian fantasy," goes through "a gradual process of 'deconstruction'" (302) that "may be" results in the new incarnation of Christianity.

Manlove's *Christian Fantasy* "illustrates" many of the themes shared by non-secular critical approaches and suggests their shortcomings. Firstly, it evokes the disembodied feminine and renders "real" nineteenth-century women as absent, an absence aided by the rigid classification of genre. Secondly, the use of imperialist and colonialist discourse (transatlantic rivalry, Christian "orientalism") to speak a prophetic mode, which casts the literary critic as theologian and claims interpretative hegemony, serves to write a rejection of secularization, and speaks the desire for Truth. Thirdly, this Truth appears contingent on Stewart's "vexed gap" between literary and social sciences (see above, introduction 22), a result (in Manlove's case) of naïve "orientalism." Fourthly, Truth is textually imminent, to be revealed through a process of "reverse deconstruction" which will, hopefully, reveal Presence, a new textual incarnation. And fifthly, this is a theology of the text, a modern soteriology of the word responding to a loss of Christian hegemony.

This extreme faith in the text and nostalgic desire for power informs the methodological activities of the disciplines of "religion and literature" and "literature and theology" to varying degrees. It can skew perspective to such a degree that it is understandable why many secular critics whose work includes reading literature and religion have no methodological connections with such work.⁹ While appearing

⁹ Academic connections exist however. David Jasper and T. R. Wright (see discussion below, 35-41) are the editors of a collection of "mainstream" scholarship (by B. M. G. Reardon, Elisabeth Jay, Hilary Fraser and others). It is only at the very end of their brief preface that the editorial agenda (one which seems to have little connection with the contributions themselves) is revealed in the best

marginal to academia, however (partly through self-designation, see below, 39-40), "religion and theology" and its earlier transatlantic precursor "religion and literature" are outgrowths of certain central tendencies in literary, theological and religious studies and continue to exist in a dialectical relationship with the mainstream. These "tendencies" stem back to the Victorian intellectuals' obsession with the text (see above, introduction 12-13) and literature and religion's common scion, nineteenth-century theology.

From the mystical and quasi-sacramental poetic of the Oxford Movement through Arnold's soteriology of poetry and its culmination in the Paterian aesthetic, the Victorians developed a critical tradition devoted to exploring a dialectic of literature and religion.¹⁰ This tradition rested on certain premises: that literature had an inherent moral and religious role, and that this role was necessary theologically and therefore socially.

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay [...]. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact [...] it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the

Arnoldian manner, with a "reminder that the theological enterprise neglects the imagination at its peril. To examine and to maintain a living faith is the responsibility as much of the poet and critic as of the theologian." See David Jasper and T. R. Wright, eds., *The Critical Spirit and the Will to Believe: Essays in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Religion*, Collection of papers read at the Third National Conference on Literature and Religion, Durham University, 1986 (New York: St. Martin's, 1989) xii.

¹⁰ To John Keble, Professor of Poetry at Oxford, poets were (almost) "representatives of religion," and the symbols of poetry (almost) "sacraments"; before the advent of Christ "*poetical* forms of thought and language" were "the ordained vehicle of revelation," "fit *media* through which [God's] supernatural glories and dealings might be discerned." See Keble, "Lectures on Poetry" 1844 and "Tract 89. On the Mysticism Attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church" 1840, *The Evangelical and Oxford Movements*, ed. Elisabeth Jay, Cambridge English Prose Texts (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 150, 148, 147. "Poetry [...] is our mysticism," wrote John Henry Newman, "penetrat[ing] below the surface of things [...] draw[ing] men away from the material to the invisible world." See Newman, "Prospects of the Anglican Church" 1839, *Essays Critical and Historical*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, 1890) 291. Christina Rossetti inherited the Tractarian approach to poetry as a religious mode and was the preeminent practitioner of the poetic endeavour as an Imitation of Christ. See, for example, Antony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988) 68-69, 101. Arnold is briefly noted in the text. By the latter part of the century, the role of art has become so exaggerated that the Ruskinian understanding of Beauty as partaking of the Divine (a position shared by Rossetti), has become the Paterian notion of the divine as beauty.

idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.¹¹

The role of the generic critic, as stated by Arnold, is an elevated one; both apprehender and disseminator of Truth, the critic is "to lead [man] towards perfection" by "*learn[ing] and propagat[ing] the best that is known and thought in the world*."¹² Both the privileging of the human Word as somehow playing a role in the construction of social morality, and the poet's and critic's privileged position in relationship to the Ultimate, continued into the twentieth century, institutionalised by the "founding fathers" of the discipline of English Literature. The elements in Manlove's work noted above as representative of non-secular approaches can easily be identified as a direct inheritance from the Victorians. This inheritance is not piece-meal but forms an ideological cluster with each element metonymically linked to the others. Mary Poovey, for example, has shown the connection between the disembodied feminine as Madonna—the domestic ideal—and imperial discourse in the Victorian encounter with India.¹³

Following Terry Eagleton's implication of imperial and theological discourse in the formation of English Literature one can also see the disembodied feminine as central to this formulation.¹⁴ T. S. Eliot argued that poetry objectified experience, it was "an escape from emotion" and "personality."¹⁵ This flight from the body into the text is reliant on the repression of the body; once depersonalised into the text (and if considered by Eliot to be worthy), it became part of the new literary canon: "The

¹¹ Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry" 1880, *Selected Prose*, ed. P. J. Keating (London: Penguin, 1987) 340, italics original.

¹² Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" 1865, *Selected Prose* 144, 156, italics original.

¹³ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), chapter six: "A Housewifely Woman: The Social Construction of Florence Nightingale," 164-98.

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) e.g. 30.

¹⁵ T. S. Eliot, 1920. Quoted in David Robey, "Anglo-American New Criticism," *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. A. Jefferson and D. Robey, 2nd ed. (London: Batsford, 1988) 80.

Tradition," imbued (by Eliot) with the authority of the old scriptural canon, and practising a kind of symbolic rape on its readers, its metaphors seizing them by the—as Eliot put it—"cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts."¹⁶ While both the masculine and the feminine bodies are repressed, the masculine (the poet) is transcended, although its force is not negated, merely transposed on to the text and used to enforce subjection of the feminine (the reader). Eliot's patriarchal poetic perfectly illustrates the hegemonic privileging of individual, linguistic religious expression over somatic, corporate forms mentioned above in the introduction (3); in Eliot's case "over" is not so much a term of comparison as an adverbial marker of poetic tyranny.¹⁷ Eliot did not believe in the freedom of belief and called for critical censorship, the reading of literature "from a definite ethical and theological standpoint." By 1935 this necessitated a Christian reading because "the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism," and one could not have the masses being penetrated by heretical texts.¹⁸

New Criticism continued to privilege textual transcendence as did the Structuralists, although here the search for "the meaning" was abandoned. The demise of positivist scholarship led to the rise of specific disciplines: "religion and literature" at Chicago and Drew from the 1950s and, with the rise of post-structuralism, the more recent English "literature and theology" which shares with other academic disciplines a central focus on language and has seen the postmodern text as a rebirth of theological possibility.

For David Jasper, the leading practitioner of "literature and theology," the "crucial question" is this: "how does theology respond to the moment of the apparent collapse of coherence in language, meaning and reference, to the denial of logocentricity

¹⁶ Quoted in Eagleton 40.

¹⁷ Eliot's poetics also resulted in (assistant) editorial tyranny. Of his work at the *Egoist* he wrote to his father that "I struggle to keep the writing as much as possible in Male hands, as I distrust the Feminine in literature [...]." T. S. Eliot, "To his father," 31 Oct. 1917, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot, vol. 1 1898-1922 (San Diego: Harcourt, 1988) 204.

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature" 1935, *Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson, jr. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1975) 21, 28.

and the radical suspicion cast upon the whole Western metaphysical tradition?"¹⁹ Jasper suggests that the problem in itself provides the answer. Careful attention to the textual vagaries of "great works of the literary imagination" not only supports postmodernism's claims as to the open-endedness and plurality of textual "meaning," but demonstrates that these claims are in fact Christian claims. The notoriously ambiguous status of Milton's Satan demonstrates not, as Blake would have it, that Milton was of the devil's camp without knowing it, but that *Paradise Lost* as theodicy demonstrates through its plurality of meaning "that *faith* is a recognition of and a commitment to the deferment of ultimate meaning."²⁰ Christianity has been "postmodern" all along it appears; Derrida is a theologian; and deconstruction, suggests Jasper, is an "echo" of the "mystical Christian tradition."²¹ This is a mysticism purified of its bodily traces, however, located in the "beyond" of the text. While Jasper claims he is rising to the challenge of logocentrism and situates Derrida as the presiding angel of his text, his emphasis on textuality and rejection of "experience" as a basis for theology (which is now dependent on a critically correct reading of metaphor) is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot, and results in a non-response to postmodernity's charge of *phallogentrism*.

Eliot as the seminal figure in religion and literature studies is both loved and hated by many of his sons, continuing to structure their texts and concerns. *European Literature and Theology in the Twentieth Century* (1990), comprised of papers from a conference entitled "Where the Wasteland Ends," is arranged around a core of two chapters on Eliot followed by one on poetry "after Eliot." Jasper, while rejecting many of Eliot's literary judgements, does so by insisting on the religiosity of modern

¹⁹ David Jasper and Colin Crowder, eds., *European Literature and Theology in the Twentieth Century: Ends of Time* (New York: St. Martins, 1990) vii. Jasper is Professor of Theology and Literature at Glasgow and co-editor of the journal *Literature and Theology*.

²⁰ David Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction*, Studies in Literature and Religion (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) 90, italics original.

²¹ Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion* 116. Carl A. Raschke notes of theology's romance with postmodernism that much of it is a "'post-modern' feint [...] devised for what is *prima facie* a pre-modern gnosticism, or 'perennialism.'" See "Fire and Roses: Toward Authentic Post-Modern Religious Thinking," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (Winter 1990): 676.

literature, thus allowing him to reclaim Eliot's "ethical and theological standpoint." As in any oedipal complex the assumption of the Father's voice involves the repression of the feminine: women are conspicuously marginal, as they were to Eliot's "Tradition." The female text is positioned on the very boundaries: of the male text, and of discourse itself. In *European Literature and Theology* the one female text is located in the final chapter (by Robert Detweiler), significantly on "Apocalyptic Fiction." In *The Study of Literature and Religion* Jasper's "apocalyptic" final chapter chooses to locate the deconstructive force, the revelation of a profound "absence," in a female authored text. Jasperian "Deconstruction" evokes this text as a kind of black hole; having read it, having removed all traces of "presence," we are "purified" and, with "a new caution, the religious journey might begin afresh."²² In this centrality of the disembodied feminine Jasper seems equally deserving of Diana Fuss's criticism of Derridian essentialism:

in the end Derrida does not so much challenge that woman has an essence as insist that we can never "rigorously" or "properly" identify it. Women's essence is simply "undecidable," a position which frequently inverts itself in deconstruction to the suggestion that it is the essence of woman to *be* the undecidable.²³

Having reconfirmed absence in the female, the Jasperian male begins again his search for presence.

For T. R. Wright, the joy of literature is that it can "do" theology "better," free it from the problems of literalism:

²² The text is Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem*. Spark is evoked as a dutiful daughter, her text as a mimicking of the deconstructive Book of Job. Similarly, Jasper's female theorist—Janet Soskice—appears as "dutiful daughter" of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion* 135, 129, x.

²³ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 14.

because no language is completely transparent upon reality, providing unambiguous "names" for clear-cut "things" [...] the indirect mode of reference employed in literature constitutes some of the most effective theology. [...] [it can] generate meanings which could not be attained in any other way.

The point is not to replace one metaphor with another, addressing God continually as Mother instead of Father, She rather than He, or to invent a Goddess of our own creation, but to recognize the metaphorical status of all these terms.²⁴

Following in Eliot's footsteps, Jasper and Wright's flight from the body into the freedom of the text is grounded in presence—the repression of the feminine and the assumption of the phallus. Both set out to recolonise the wasteland, condemning as false prophets those who have gone "soft." For Wright, the Deconstructionist's rejection of language's referentiality demonstrates an "impotent purity" (32). For Jasper, the problem lies with the "Americans" and their "odd new discipline" "religion and literature" which privileges literature and studies "religion as a phenomenon within culture," a situation which "simply will not do." It is (shades of Eliot) "Religion (and literature) without commitment." The Americans David Hesla and Giles Gunn (particular targets of Jasper's opprobrium),²⁵ explored the possibilities offered by structuralist analyses of culture as a system, but Gunn, for example, still considered the critic's task to be to "lift perception to the level of moral insight," and in fact shared Jasper's favourable account of Paul Ricoeur's rejection of the transparent text for the possibilities created by the text.²⁶ To Jasper, however, their enterprise is tainted by its non-engagement with theology proper, a non-engagement resulting from their lack of

²⁴ T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literature*, Signposts in Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) 10 and 132. Wright teaches English Literature at Newcastle on Tyne, is co-editor of *Literature and Theology*, and has written *John Henry Newman* (1983) and *The Religion of Humanity* (1986).

²⁵ Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion* 1-2.

²⁶ See Giles Gunn, "Threading the Needle: The Place of the Literary Critic in Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 43 (June 1975): 184; David H. Hesla, "Religion and Literature: The Second Stage," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (June 1978): 181-92.

"pure" religious or national identity as Americans.²⁷ Jasper's, in fact, is a "virile" poetics of nationalism and colonisation, an enterprise involving "living dangerously," "in risk-laden, untidy and even disordered territory [...] concerned with [...] challenge and even conflict," and embellished with unacknowledged, perhaps unconscious, quoting of nineteenth-century novels of faith and doubt.²⁸

In his 1992 "retrospective," while distancing himself from the Eliotesque "high priest of culture" stance, Jasper makes it even clearer that he sees any use of extra-theological methodologies as a sign of profound conservatism, probably aligned with (doomed) attempts to sustain "an ailing theological tradition" or critically protect "a religious sense in north America."²⁹ To study religion as a cultural system, in other words, is ultimately a reversion to nationalism, as much as is the British refusal to extend the theological canon beyond Milton and others. It is a refusal to engage with "multicultural anxiety" and post-modern anxiety (the destruction of the logos) and commit oneself to the interfaith "recovery of authentic theological possibilities" (10) through the Rabbinic/postmodern "divinity of the text," the "textuality of experience itself" which "[guarantees] the absent divinity" (6) and rejects logocentrism as anti-semitic and fascist. This recovery of the divine text involves a critical "return to Renaissance values":

What I am arguing for is a much broader canvas both within and outside the Christian tradition, and that the study of literature and theology should learn to relocate itself not as another discipline *within* academia, but remain uncomfortably, without stability, lodged between an almost limitless range of

²⁷ David Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology: Five Years On," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 6 (Mar. 1992): 2.

²⁸ Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion* 1, 2, 6. One obvious Victorian echo is from Mrs Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere*: "with a sense of life renewed, and a new caution, the religious journey might begin afresh" (*The Study of Literature and Religion* x).

²⁹ Jasper, "The Study of Literature and Theology: Five Years On" 2.

creative and critical expressions of our condition—religiously, socially, culturally and politically. Remaining distrustful of all, it must risk professional rejection by continuing to draw our attention to the awkward encounters in our traditions between expressions of belief and instances of violence or beauty beyond the pale. (7-8, italics original)

To read the encounters with "instances of violence or beauty beyond the pale" is the new soteriology, the apprehension of the absent divinity; the Holocaust in particular is identified as the moment of ultimate epistemological horror and the moment of rebirth, the text that cannot be read, the point of silence, that thereby breeds a "theology of hope" conveyed by the new theological texts—"post Holocaust" postmodernist philosophy. Patrick Süsskind's novel *Perfume* is offered as another example of this necessary encounter. Jasper concentrates on the juxtaposition of beauty and violence, agape and "'sparagmos'—violent and unreflective dismemberment" (8)—epitomised by the dismemberment and cannibalisation of the novel's main character, the master perfumer, by the mob. This climactic moment, however, is dependent on earlier moments of enforced silence: the "perfume" is the essence derived from the virginal bodies of murdered young girls. The questions posed by this feminine "essence," the violence involved in its contribution of silence to the reading as textual theology, go unremarked. For Jasper the modern task of theology is theodicy and one might ask in Jasperian vein whether this is not the real moment where the "absent God, obscuring his face in the smoke of the ovens, becomes [...] paradoxically, the condition of [...] belief"? Jasper, however, does not ask it. Like Süsskind's perfumer Jasper utilises the feminine textual body as essence and, although vital to the plot, the feminine somatic remains subject to textual theology, enabling its transcendence, while the somatic more generally seems to represent chaos and violence. Recalling Fuss's criticism of Derridean essentialism and considering her similar analysis of "woman" in Lacan, again begs the question of whether an Eliotesque phallogocentrism still lurks in Jasper's textual theology.

[...] Lacan attempts to bring woman to the point of speech by approximating the vanishing point in his own speech. In his theory of woman as "not all," Lacan posits the essence of woman as an enigmatic excess or remainder. [...] In fact, essence operates in Lacan as a leftover classical component which re-emerges in his theory of woman precisely because it is woman who escapes complete subjection to the Symbolic and its formative operations. In her inscription as not all (as Truth, lack, Other, *objet a*, God) woman becomes for Lacan the very repository of essence.³⁰

The "theologians" take refuge in postmodernism, their textual purity reliant on and yet suppressing the body, their concentration on the philosophy of language sidelining the historical, scientific, and feminist challenges to Christianity's signification. Although far more sophisticated, such scholarship also demonstrates many of the themes identified in the work of Manlove (see above, 32). Both Jasper and Wright, although in different ways, focus on language to the exclusion of the historical body, a methodological approach that can include women and their texts, but theoretically results in feminine disembodiment. The assumption of the "prophetic voice" is designed to function as an ethical subtext to the "mainstream," speaking many of its "silences"³¹; this is a discourse that effectively denies the critical voice of other scholarly disciplines, however, and that has silences of its own.

³⁰ Fuss 12.

³¹ Another example of the Religion and Literature critic in prophetic mode is Wesley A. Kort, "'Religion and Literature' in Postmodernist Contexts," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58 (Winter 1990): 575-88. The Postmodernist context means "Religion and Literature" "can be freed from the confinements of essentialist and foundationalist paradigms" (585); for its part, "Religion and Literature" can provide an ethical interrogation of Postmodernism (e.g. 582).

2. Womanlove and Methodological Reflections

If T. S. Eliot is the patriarch of twentieth-century religion and literature studies, Carol Christ is its matriarch. Writing in late 1970s North America Christ developed a "feminist methodology" for reading religion and literature. Christ's methodology was designed to correct the discipline's "androcentric bias" which she saw as directly related to the textual emphasis of New Criticism. For Christ a criticism primarily concerned with textuality was, like theology itself, an expression of masculine elitism: "Romantic and autonomist theories, are, it seems, the prerogatives of those whose selfhood has been so adequately defined by literature over the years as to render representational concerns and criticisms boring."³²

Beginning with Kate Millett's immensely influential *Sexual Politics* (1969), late twentieth-century feminist critics have scanned literature for what it could or—in the case of Millett's unfortunates—could not tell us about women as real historical beings. Christ and the other '70s feminists picked up on sporadic earlier efforts³³ and began the vast task of an archaeology of women: non- or mis-representation was rejected and the process of recovery and correction fostered a quest for the quintessential female ontology and experience. Male- and female-authored literature was seen as a resource for this process; female-authored literature was expected to provide access to this "essence."³⁴ Literature was seen as a kind of repository for what was not recorded elsewhere, a location where women's voices could be heard more or less distinctly. In the case of religious scholarship such a source was desperately needed: Church

³² Carol P. Christ, "Feminist Studies in Religion and Literature: A Methodological Reflection," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (1976): 320.

³³ Mary Ellmann's earlier *Thinking about Women* (1968) focuses exclusively on literary matters. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is the major precursor of the 1970s attempt to "reembody" women, but is itself predated by works such as Mrs E. F. Ellet's *Women Artists in All Ages and Countries* (1859) which also begins with prehistory, or the American *The Women's Bible* (1895,'98) which effectively begins at *the beginning*.

³⁴ And castigated if it didn't. Virginia Woolf was a favourite casualty; see Toril Moi's introduction to *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, *New Accents* (London: Methuen, 1985) 1-18.

histories present a female silence even where women functioned in traditionally male capacities (Methodist female preachers, for example) as did many academic works, even those authoritative tomes that were promoted as "a full-blooded portrayal of [...] religion in its totality"³⁵ and Christ was writing before Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller broke new ground with a three volume documentary history, *Women and Religion in America* (San Francisco: Harper, 1981-86).³⁶ Positing an alternative and parallel female religious tradition (in the same way as other critics traced literary and historical traditions), and wanting to discover "what women's religious experience would be like when it was articulated in women's own language, not forced into the structures of male theology," Christ turned to women-authored texts as a source for an "authentically female religious outlook."³⁷

The desire to recover this authenticity coupled with her typing of formalism as patriarchal led Christ to espouse a combination of mimetic and reader response theories of literature. In the admirable attempt to enable "religious" criticism of women's writing and avoid the "intentional fallacy" (the authors discussed unaware that they were producing "scripture"), Christ nullified textual location and emphasised performance: stories that have a "sacred" dimension are not identified by genre³⁸ but by "their *function* in providing orientation to life's flow."³⁹ This function is activated via

³⁵ Review quoted on the dust-cover of Owen Chadwick's *The Victorian Church*, 3rd ed., 2 vols. (London: Black, 1971).

³⁶ In 1983 Dale A. Johnson followed with an English counterpart to Ruether and Keller: *Women in English Religion, 1700-1925*, Studies in Women and Religion 10 (New York: Mellen, 1983). These works providing primary source material were preceded by a number of studies in women's religious history, for example: Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon, 1974) and Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin, ed., *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon, 1979). *Women of Spirit* identified "the chief problem in charting any history of women" as "the recovery and use of sources" (16).

³⁷ Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980) xii; "Feminist Studies in Religion and Literature: A Methodological Reflection" 317.

³⁸ In *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, text, speech and visual art are all collapsed into "story": "articulations of experience that have a narrative element" (1). Indeed text is not distinguished from any other form of expression, including "talking with friends": literature is only one of the art forms that expresses a "new underlying sensibility, a 'sacred story,' which is surfacing in women's culture as a whole" (121).

³⁹ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* 4, my italics.

the reader's recognition of herself in the text; the text is "mimetic," that is, it "reflects women's experience," and it is the reader's identification with the text that generates its meaning, and reciprocally, the meaning of the reader.

Readers, of course, read from their location in history, which Christ recognised by ostensibly limiting her claims of scriptural status to twentieth-century women's writing, but the closed circle of her hermeneutic denies this as an operative principle. Despite a few disclaimers to the contrary, "experience" becomes a totalising and transhistorical category. Apart from condemning us to an infinity of the 1970s Californian women's liberation version of "spirituality," the reader and text locked into a narcissistic self-perpetuating reflexivity, the implication is that pre-modern women's writing belongs to the realm of "inauthentic" story-telling, when women suppressed their experience into male forms—the literature of women's "dark ages," when theology ruled the world. In a classic misreading Christ likened her critical "quest" to Adrienne Rich's metaphor of diving beneath the wreck of patriarchal civilization in search of a hidden treasure"; we are not just searching for women's experience underneath the text, but women's experience "underneath" history, experience symbolised in the reemergence of the goddess and the dawning of a new age of *thealogy*, the speaking of which is a "new naming" that "has the potential to transform the way people view the world."⁴⁰ This "new" aesthetic is a prescriptive poetic that ironically excludes women's writing from the past: religio-literary achievement is to be judged "from the perspective of women's need for *new* stories."⁴¹

Christ's primary concern was not in fact historical accuracy; like Jasper her interest lies in the prophetic role of literature and (in common with all the critics so far

⁴⁰ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* xiv, 24.

In *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas identifies an earlier "clerical-feminine [...] flight from history" (188) into the body, "subordinating historical progress to biological process" (202), which strategy she notes has an imperialist dimension (225)—the colonisation of heaven (213-14)—and explains as the outcome of a fear of historicity, of change (199).

⁴¹ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* 39, my italics.

"One task facing women writers is to write stories in which the spiritual and social quest can be combined in the life of a living, realistic woman. And, also, one task facing readers is not to be fully satisfied with women's literature until it does so" (ibid.).

discussed) of the critic. Her mimetic methodology is intended to not only identify accurate representations of "experience" but also a "hypothetical world."⁴² Like the later male "theology and literature" critics, Christ was explicitly concerned with the theological, or as she would prefer it theological, possibilities of the text; unlike Jasper and others she sought to dismantle the elitist status of theology and of the text.

[...] Ruether has argued that women have a crucial role to play [in the overthrow of classical dualisms] [...]. A re-valuing of the so-called negative sides of the classic dualisms and a transformation of the hierarchical mentality is implicit in women's quest. To put it another way, women's quest is for a wholeness in which the oppositions between body and soul, nature and spirit or freedom, rationality and emotion are overcome.⁴³

As part of this project materiality is reaffirmed; theology is not disembodied and otherworldly but intrinsic to political life: "women's spiritual quest undergirds every moment of women's social quest."⁴⁴ While in the later "theology and literature" critics metaphor and the text have replaced materiality, Christ's poetics foreground the physical body; she herself becomes a kind of shaman:

themes and images from the novels and poems have reflected and validated my own spiritual quest. [...] One night when I was thinking about how Martha "connected" to "currents and forces of energy," waited and let them "collect," I tuned into a powerful energy source. I found myself able to do push-ups, sit-ups, and other exercises that I had never been able to do. (*Diving Deep*, xiii)

⁴² Christ, "Feminist Studies in Religion and Literature: A Methodological Reflection" 322.

⁴³ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* 26.

⁴⁴ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* 11.

For Christ the somatic grounds the linguistic; language speaks the Truth of the corporate feminine body. Christ is in fact one of the formulators of modern spirituality, privileging the Truth of the oppressed body; and read as a theologian, rather than a literary critic, her work reveals the extent to which modern spirituality is a poetics. The text is essential to its practice and yet textuality itself is negated, the text is read in and through the body. A counter-discourse to "androcentric" discourses of her day, and still relevant in its critique (indeed newly relevant in the context of the counter-discourse of Jasper and others), Christ's work is still infected with the Eliotesque: inverting rather than resolving the hierarchical dualisms. Her callisthenic "anti-textual" poetic creates a canon exclusive as any "Tradition," distinguished by the substitution of womanlove for manlove.⁴⁵

3. Cassandra and the Mainstream

Over the course of the twentieth century a small number of collections of and studies in "religion and literature" by literary scholars have been published, from the solitary efforts of Helen Gardner—her collections of Christian poetry providing a "liturgical" accompaniment to the emerging "secular" canon—to descriptive studies of the religious novel by Margaret Maison and Robert Wolff, for example.⁴⁶ Major studies in this area include J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God* (1963), a work

⁴⁵ See Mary Grey's *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989), for an unsatisfactory attempt to resolve Christ's hermeneutic with Christian and Foucauldian notions of truth and discourse by reading women's texts as "an insurrection of subjugated knowledges," knowledges which are the "very stuff of the Kingdom of Heaven" (9). Grey, thankfully, does not pretend to be a literary critic.

⁴⁶ Although Helen Gardner's Christianity is obvious, her principal focus is to ensure the consideration of religion as a valid and indeed crucial critical concern. See, for example, *Religion and Literature* (London: Faber, 1971).

Margaret M. Maison, *Search Your Soul, Eustace: A Survey of the Religious Novel in the Victorian Age* (London: Stag-Sheed, 1961).

Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (New York: Garland, 1977). Examples of more specialised genre-based works are Elizabeth Jay's study, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979); Joseph Ellis Baker, *The Novel and the Oxford Movement* (New York: Russell, 1965). Although over 30 years old, Baker's plea for the validity of religion as an element of cultural analysis, and his noting that "there is an Intolerance today which thinks any attention to religion, unless hostile, merely a waste of time" (xii), have only recently become less necessary or relevant.

at once informed by the Eliotesque critic who regards literature as the new religion and a secularization view of nineteenth-century culture (see above, introduction 8n9), an approach that Miller continued to promote.⁴⁷

A more recent study is Lance St John Butler's *Victorian Doubt: Literary and Cultural Discourses* (1990). Butler demonstrates the pervasiveness of religious discourse in Victorian literature; he fails, however, to answer his own call for an "account of the Victorians that does not rely too heavily on our belief that we know the end of the story." Butler begins his study by problematizing the relationship between "faith" and "doubt," arguing that "Neither belief nor unbelief is an origin," an absolute or norm from which its opposite is a deviation. As one would expect from the title, however, "doubt" is clearly privileged by the text; "faith" is in fact effectively represented as a negative force. As "the cultural discourse that is the language that writes us," which "will not permit us to escape," "faith" lingers on as "a powerful residue of lexical items, syntactical structures and, above all, metaphorical conventions that prevent any Victorian expressing him or herself without employing a covert metaphysics."⁴⁸

Jeffrey Cox noted in 1982 that "It is difficult to overstate the extent to which the very best historians of Victorian religion are addicted to the language of inevitable and irreversible decline, decay, and failure, and explain that historical change with references to an underlying 'process' of secularization."⁴⁹ More recent histories of the "crisis of faith" have rejected the secularization framework as too simplistic however, as is indicated by the title of a 1990 collection: *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*. Such a work demonstrates an attempt to close "the persistent gulf between social practice [...] and the

⁴⁷ See, for example, J. Hillis Miller's "Literature and Religion," Tennyson and Ericson, jr. 31-45, an Eliotesque poetics of "Theology" rather than a consideration of religion as cultural discourse.

⁴⁸ Lance St John Butler, *Victorian Doubt: Literary and Cultural Discourses* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990) 6, 3, 56.

⁴⁹ Jeffrey Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870-1930* (New York: Oxford UP, 1982) 265.

master texts of a culture" noted by Garrett Stewart in his review of Wheeler (see above, introduction 22). Frank Turner's essay, for example, stresses the contribution of the bourgeois family to an individual's loss of faith.⁵⁰ A more sophisticated understanding of text combined with a rejection of the secularization thesis informs James R. Moore's contention that Victorian intellectuals did not *lose* their faith: theological categories and enterprises, specifically theodicy, continued in scientific, "naturalistic" guise.⁵¹ Although Moore's Marxism and Wheeler's phenomenology (see discussion above, introduction 22n41) might appear to situate their work in totally different locations, both share an avoidance of gender issues and a focus on theological categories. That these methodological features might be connected was noted by Carol Christ who wrote, in reference to the marginalization of women's writing, that in one strand of "religion and literature" criticism "theological categories are correlated with themes and images in the literary work, or the literary work is found lacking from an antecedent theological standpoint."⁵² Within "mainstream" scholarship the relationship between theological discourse and the marginalization of the feminine has been pronounced, a relationship dating from the nineteenth century that was (as has already been mentioned) resurrected in literary studies by T. S. Eliot and has only recently been investigated.

Studies of "sage writing" and Florence Nightingale provide a useful overview of this relationship and the way in which it has shaped "mainstream" scholarship. "Sage writing" was a discourse born of the Victorian literary religious dialectic. Carlyle's seminal formulation, "Men of Letters are a perpetual Priesthood," shaped the twentieth-century critical view, John Holloway and George P. Landow treating "sage writing" as a masculine genre.⁵³ In a recent revisitation of the discourse—*Victorian*

⁵⁰ Frank M. Turner, "The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith That Was Lost," *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, ed. Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1990) 9-38.

⁵¹ James R. Moore, "Theodicy and Society: The Crisis of the Intelligentsia," Helmstadter and Lightman 153-86.

⁵² Christ, "Feminist Studies in Religion and Literature: A Methodological Reflection" 321. It might be noted here that *Victorian Faith in Crisis* has no female contributors.

⁵³ Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Man of Letters" 1841. Quoted in Carol T. Christ, "The Hero as Man of Letters': Masculinity and Victorian Nonfiction Prose," *Victorian Sages and Cultural*

Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power—Carol T. Christ has pointed out that its "strenuously masculine" character was in part a complement to "the success of the lady novelists," and that Victorian women did speak as sages: Charlotte Brontë and Christina Rossetti are among their number and Landow himself discusses Nightingale's *Cassandra* as a feminized instance of "the kind of aggressive prose created by Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin, a prose modeled on that of Jeremiah and Daniel."⁵⁴ Despite Landow, the inclusion of female sages results in part from the postmodernist shift in theoretical/methodological emphasis from "genre" to the more inclusive "discourse," but more so from the impact of feminist criticism.⁵⁵

Nightingale's *Cassandra*, although written in 1852, only appeared publicly in 1928 and then only in the appendices of Ray Strachey's *The Cause*. (A surprising omission from Landow's discussion of the female appropriation of an authoritative genre is the privacy of this work.)⁵⁶ In common with many nineteenth-century

Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power, ed. Thaïs Morgan (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990) 19.

John Holloway, *The Victorian Sages: Studies in Argument* (1953); George P. Landow, *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986). Ruth Y. Jenkins notes that Holloway and Landow provide archetypal instances of the total neglect of gender in scholarship on the nineteenth-century crisis of faith. See Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP; London: Associated University Presses, 1995) 19. This theoretical neglect accompanies the methodological marginalization of women's texts. Each author has effectively one female author: George Eliot (as one of Holloway's six authors; she is mentioned briefly in Landow), and the twentieth century's Joan Didion (as one of Landow's seven authors). Landow does note in his "Afterword," however, that the contribution of nineteenth-century women to sage writing needed to be explored (190). While Butler's more recent account includes women's texts, *Victorian Doubt* also bears out Jenkins's point that "any consideration of the relationship between gender" and "the Victorian spiritual crisis" "has been missing" (Jenkins 19).

⁵⁴ Carol T. Christ, "The Hero as Man of Letters': Masculinity and Victorian Nonfiction Prose," Morgan 30.

George P. Landow, "Aggressive (Re)interpretations of the Female Sage: Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra*," Morgan 32.

⁵⁵ Antony H. Harrison (*Christian Rossetti in Context*) points to the dominance of the "new critics" as the reason Christina Rossetti has been neglected (ix); he advocates instead "critically pluralistic [...] methodologies" (11) informed by new historicism, feminism, and reception theory. Harrison's desire to rescue Rossetti's texts from straightforward autobiographical readings and emphasise her "ruthless artistry," reinstating her place in regard to Pre-Raphaelitism (a transition between Romantic and modern literary modes), tends to marginalize her place in the female tradition. While an exercise in "mainstream" literary history, however, Harrison's subtle contextual and intertextual readings allow him to consider Rossetti as both a literary and a religious figure, explaining her renunciation of the world as both an aesthetic and an ascetic gesture.

⁵⁶ Nightingale had six copies of *Suggestions for Thought to the Searchers After Truth among the Artizans of England* privately (and anonymously) printed by Eyre and Spottiswoode in 1860. She offered copies to a number of influential men including Jowett and John Stuart Mill. While both offered criticisms of her work, opinion is divided over how much encouragement or discouragement she

women's texts, *Cassandra* reentered the public arena in the twentieth century under the aegis of feminist critics and publishing houses. But until the recent Poovey edition it has always been treated as a piece of political polemic, complete in itself, rather than what it is: an excerpt from the three volume theological work *Suggestions for Thought to^{the} Searchers after Religious Truth*.⁵⁷ Elaine Showalter's designation of Nightingale's religious discourse as epiphenomenal is typical of feminist literary criticism: "Like other gifted women of her generation, she translated intellectual and vocational drives into the language of religion, the only system that could justify them."⁵⁸ The religious historian Gail Malmgreen, however, reminds us of the historical precedence of religion over politics:

Feminist historians should not forget that women took to the public platform on behalf of religion long before they were stirred by politics; that women left the home in droves to conduct Sunday schools and prayer-meetings long before they campaigned for professional training; and that religious writing offered middle-class women a chance to be self-supporting even before the heyday of the great female novelists.⁵⁹

To simply reverse the hierarchy and argue that women's later political and literary discourse is a "translation" from the religious, however, is to remain locked within a

received regarding publication. See Nancy Boyd, *Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale: Three Victorian Women Who Changed Their World* (London: Macmillan, 1982) 198; F. B. Smith, *Florence Nightingale: Reputation and Power* (London: Croom Helm, 1982) 185-88. See also below n60. Landow had raised the issue of privacy in *Elegant Jeremiahs*, but, despite calling for attention to reader response, saw it as a question of genre alone: letters and diaries are private, sage writing is public (190).

⁵⁷ See for example *Cassandra: An Essay by Florence Nightingale*, introduction by Myra Stark and epilogue by Cynthia MacDonald (Old Westbury, New York: Feminist, c1979).

Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra and Other Selections from Suggestions for Thought*, ed. Mary Poovey, Pickering Women's Classics (London: Pickering, 1991).

⁵⁸ Elaine Showalter, "Florence Nightingale's Feminist Complaint: Women, Religion, and *Suggestions for Thought*," *Signs* 6 (Spring 1981): 397.

⁵⁹ Malmgreen, introduction, *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930* (London: Croom Helm, 1986) 5.

limiting binary opposition. The unfortunate consequences of this methodology we have seen demonstrated by Carol Christ, the "Founding Mother" of feminist "religion and literature" studies. As Malmgreen notes: "If feminist historians ignore religion, or confine themselves to the wilder fringes of female spirituality, we will have forfeited our understanding of the mental universe of the no doubt substantial majority of women who were believers" (3). Like Christ, although with a far more sophisticated understanding of text, Malmgreen points to female-authored literature as a vital resource: women's texts are "where women's voices are most clearly heard" (3). Nightingale's "fleshing out" of the Word, however, was heard only by a selected few. Nightingale's feminine Christology was revolutionary without a doubt (although not unique), but to all intents and purposes, textually it was silent. If Showalter's secularism was not sufficient to deal with this self-imposed silence, neither is Landow's revisionist "Add women and stir" approach.⁶⁰ The work of Mary Poovey demonstrates how a more complex understanding of the workings of ideology has resulted in a rejection of the "secularist" paradigm and the possibility of women's theological voices being heard. Although in 1989 Poovey emphasised the secularity of Nightingale's vision and explained (sounding very like Showalter) how Nightingale's "call" to the Crimea "helped parry her family's objections and lent legitimacy to her ambition,"⁶¹ Poovey herself seems to have felt uncomfortable with this rather cursory treatment. By 1991 she had introduced and edited a selection from Nightingale's *Suggestions for*

⁶⁰ Nightingale had some strong support from Benjamin Jowett to publish her thoughts: "I sometimes wish that you would write more [...]. Your writings appear to me to be very effective. Don't you think that if one has any true ideas—whether about the Army, the position of women, or about subjects of theology—it is a duty not to let them be lost?..." (Benjamin Jowett, "To Miss Nightingale," 9 Feb. 1865, letter 39 of *Dear Miss Nightingale: A Selection of Benjamin Jowett's Letters to Florence Nightingale, 1860-1893*, ed. Vincent Quinn and John Prest [Oxford: Clarendon, 1987] 42). However, this support was not extended to *Suggestions* and Nightingale accepted the advice not to publish, see Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself": A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 47. Poovey gives a slightly different impression: "While neither [Mill or Jowett] recommended publishing *Suggestions* without considerable revision, both men were impressed and annotated their copies extensively" (Introduction to *Cassandra*, viii). Jenkins holds that "Mill loved the book and urged publication" whereas Jowett urged caution (*Reclaiming Myths of Power* 37). Nightingale did publish two brief articles in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1873 "With the militant challenges to patriarchy removed" (Jenkins 162n20).

⁶¹ Poovey, *Uneven Developments* 167. It seems clear that Poovey has only read *Cassandra* at this time.

Thought which includes *Cassandra* but situates it in its larger context, which Poovey designates "A major contribution to the religious controversies of the 1850s [...]."62

Of course few nineteenth-century women wrote such works, even privately, and scholars of women's "theology and literature" need to take a broad perspective, not restricting themselves to particular genres or tying themselves to a narrow genealogical framework and attempting to give both literary and theological/religious discourse "equal time." Robyn Warhol's *Gendered Interventions* (1989) and Christine Krueger's *The Reader's Repentance* (1992) are works that attempt to account for women's public voice in terms of a relationship between literary and religious discourse. Warhol writes that for women who wanted to intervene in history their only option was to write; the challenge was to find a mode of writing that could wield the kind of power that public speaking represented for men. Realistic fiction became that mode.⁶³ While this thesis is applicable to George Eliot, for example, Nightingale, perhaps the most successful of the Victorian female "historical interventionists," never wrote a novel.⁶⁴ Warhol's point is that women novelists utilised the preaching mode in order to convert their readers and this narrative strategy was a way for women to speak with authority whilst preserving their femininity: "Both preacher and novelist want to 'touch' the audience. The Victorian male preacher does so by using his voice as an extension of his body; the Victorian female novelist shields her body by placing her voice in a text" (191).

Apart from the "private" texts—letters and *Suggestions for Thought*—many of Nightingale's interventions occurred through the direct or indirect utilisation of prosaic yet unquestionably authoritative male modes: quantities of Reports and the lobbying of influential men. Nightingale did remove her body from the public sphere of course, but only after its intense exposure in the Crimea, and given the continuity between the

62 Poovey, introduction, *Cassandra and Other Selections from Suggestions for Thought* vii.

63 Robyn R. Warhol, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989) 166.

64 *Suggestions* began life in two manuscript books, "Religion" and "Novel," but Nightingale abandoned the novel format (although Poovey points out that traces remain in "Cassandra"). Poovey, introduction *Cassandra and Other Selections from Suggestions for Thought* viii.

Crimean body organising Scutari and the body on the couch organising hospitals in India, one might as well read Nightingale as the male preacher as the female novelist, although neither is entirely satisfactory. The preacher's voice is most obvious in *Cassandra*, a text written and revised between 1852-59, a period that incorporates the Scutari body. Within the same period of her life Nightingale displayed her body in the public sphere and wrote her immensely physical expression of desire for meaning—"Better have pain than paralysis"—in a private text. *Cassandra* is a textual counterpart to Nightingale's actual rejection of the pure (that is private) body; pure bodies, as *Cassandra* reminds us, fail to intervene in history. Nightingale's embodiment of the theology she was choosing to keep private ensured her voice would be heard. Nightingale is relatively unique of course but she shows how Warhol's injection of genre restrictions into the attempt to account for female "historical intervention" is problematic; Nightingale also renders the relationship between body and text a complex one.

This is also a problematic matter for Krueger.⁶⁵ To Warhol the uncomfortable visual treatment of the woman preacher in *Adam Bede*—the representation of Dinah Morris as silent despite George Eliot's emphasis on her speech—is indicative of the "successful" removal of the female body from the public space of the text.⁶⁶ For Krueger Dinah's silencing and eventual reembodiment as a "proper" woman—mother and wife—is a figure for the demise of the female preaching tradition, which she sees as culminating with Eliot. Whereas Warhol's is primarily a literary methodology, narratology to be exact, Krueger's genealogy—which draws a causal link between the eighteenth-century women preachers and nineteenth-century female novelists—is highly dependent on Deborah M. Valenze's historical study: *Prophetic Sons and Daughters:*

⁶⁵ Christine L. Krueger, *The Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992).

⁶⁶ The female body and enunciation are considered to be mutually exclusive: despite the fact that "Dinah's primary role in the first part of the novel is to preach, unabashedly, unselfconsciously, powerfully, and publicly [...]. Dinah is to become the novel's heroine, and the femininity of her ultimate image required that she be drawn [by nineteenth-century illustrators] as silent," even illustrations of the preaching scene show Dinah with "her mouth firmly shut" (Warhol 181-82).

Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985). As the title suggests, Valenze's work concentrates on working-class women preachers who had largely disappeared by the 1850s. The impression Krueger creates is of a direct and exclusive correlation between these working-class women and their sermons and the later middle-class women writers and their texts. That this is an overly exclusive genealogy is noted by Mary Wilson Carpenter who criticises Krueger for considering her authors and preachers in isolation, outside the context of domestic fiction and conduct books for example. Carpenter also notes the lack of textual evidence for the literary significance of the women preachers: many women's sermons were not published or even written down in the first place.⁶⁷ Another historical factor not noted by either Krueger or Warhol is that the textual demise of Dinah's preaching career is shortly followed by the rise of the "lady-preachers" in the 1860s; the popularity of these women has been partly put down to the attraction of the female speaking body on display.⁶⁸ This complicates the implied class shift in Krueger and problematizes the rigid modesty of Warhol. Because of their overly straightforward translation of the body into the text (whether presented as a matter of historical progression or as a gendered literary strategy) both Krueger's and Warhol's version of the text has the effect of negating the female body and, paradoxically, the potential to nullify women's historical agency. Ironically, traces of Manlove lurk even in the far more scholarly feminist methodologies of Krueger and Warhol: the evocation of the disembodied feminine and the absence of "real" nineteenth-century women, an absence aided by the rigid classification of genre.

⁶⁷ Mary Wilson Carpenter, rev. of *The Reader's Repentance*, by Christine L. Krueger, *Victorian Studies* 37 (Summer 1994): 609-10.

⁶⁸ See Olive Anderson, "Women Preachers in Mid-Victorian Britain: Some Reflexions on Feminism, Popular Religion and Social Change," *The Historical Journal* 12 (1969): 467-84; Donald M. Lewis, "Lights in Dark Places": Women Evangelists in Early Victorian Britain, 1838-1857," *Women in the Church*, Papers read at the 1989 Summer meeting and the 1990 Winter meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 415-27. In response to Anderson's emphasis on the 1859 Revival (given impetus by the American Phoebe Palmer) as a direct cause of the '60s expansion in women's ministry, Lewis shows that Evangelical town missions already employed salaried, full-time female evangelists some of whom were middle-class and preached to both men and women.

The most recent attempt to offer an adequate history of Victorian women writers and theology is Ruth Y. Jenkins's *Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis* (1995). Although Jenkins begins her account with historical context this is primarily included because it provides a site for resistance: in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century ideological and material factors combined to produce "an unprecedented opportunity for individuals to challenge dominant ideologies" (15). Jenkins's excessively abbreviated account of these material and ideological factors places her study at the opposite extreme to Krueger's: Jenkins almost negates the impact of woman's clerical role, allocating it a sentence within a paragraph that limits the impact of nineteenth-century women's expanded religious roles in general. This limitation is necessary to Jenkins's argument wherein women are ultimately inspired not so much by their historical context in itself, but by the "reclaiming" of the "ur-text" (29) uncovered by the opportunities provided by their historical context. Historical location thus functions as a literal "window of opportunity," and nineteenth-century women's texts are situated not so much in history but as the intertexts of an historiography that hints at a matriarchy, a Dark Ages initiated by the establishment of Christianity, and an Enlightenment beginning with nineteenth-century bourgeois individualism (15ff). While a very interesting herstory of the "crisis of faith," with some illuminating textual and contextual analysis, *Reclaiming Myths of Power* is also, unfortunately, a revisiting of Carol Christ's reflective methodology, a diving beneath the wreck. Unlike Christ, Jenkins does not consider theology to be a critical problem in the scholarly neglect of female spiritual crises but attributes it rather to a rejection of female experience; like Christ (and Grey), Jenkins is "reclaiming myths of power" for her readers.

Jenkins identifies "the major project of analyzing Victorian women writers' reclamation of patriarchally appropriated religion" (19). What this appears to mean is that, in a similar manner to Christ's writers, "Without realizing that they were restoring the earlier suppressed, female-inclusive aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Victorian women reclaimed the power associated with this religious narrative" (25).

Unfortunately, Jenkins's central example of repressed antipatriarchal texts, and the consequent elimination of "female imagery and experience from the central and defining myths of the culture" (25), relies—uncritically—on Elaine Pagels's flawed account of the Gnostic Gospels. Pagels notes a "correlation between religious theory and social practice" where the supposed feminine symbolism is realised by the historical participation of Gnostic women in ordained ministry. This is denied by Susanne Heine in her critique of Pagels.⁶⁹ In fact rather than demonstrate the desired causality, the Gnostic texts reveal that the relationship between feminine symbols and female status is a complex one.⁷⁰ This is a point noted by another of Jenkins's sources, Judith Ochshorn:

the connection between religious or social attitudes and practices has been extremely complex. Certainly the status of women or the nature of relations between the sexes in any society cannot be inferred in a simple, linear, causal fashion merely from the content of society's religious beliefs about femininity and masculinity.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Weidenfeld, 1980) 60. Pagels believes that "if we ask whether gnostic Christians derive any practical, social consequences from their conception of God—and of humanity—in terms that included the female element. [...] clearly, the answer is yes" (59).

⁷⁰ As Heine points out, to read Gnosticism and its texts simply as "a competing vision of Christianity" (Jenkins 23) ignores its syncretic nature (Heine 108, 112). Neither of the elements that Jenkins cites as examples of threats to a "patriarchally informed theology"—that is, "female as well as male aspects of the deity and the Trinity as Father-Mother-Son" (Jenkins 23)—is true. The second element is a reference to Jesus (Heine 113), the first a complex oversimplification of a theology in which the ultimate being is spoken of in male or negative terms (114-16) and is not identical with the creator God, a misbegotten, evil figure. This demiurge is the one spoken of as "Mother-Father," and as Heine points out, "the worthlessness of those androgynous conceptions for any feminist interest becomes evident. They exclusively have negative connotations" (121). Moreover, the undeniably powerful feminine figure, Sophia, is (in her unwarranted creation of the demiurge), like Eve, responsible for a Fall. Susanne Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?* (London: SCM, 1987).

⁷¹ Judith Ochshorn, introduction, *The Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1981) x.

Indeed, as Caroline Walker Bynum demonstrated regarding the medieval period, the use of gendered imagery in religious texts by men and women can even overturn neat correlations between the sex of the author and the gender of their images. Medieval men used feminine imagery for the divine more often than women. Women, desiring to stress humanity as against the negative feminine stereotypes and status of the day, used the most profound image of humanity available, the incarnation i.e. Christ. Paradoxically, then, women's de-emphasis on feminine symbols can be empowering;

Jenkins's is no such subtle genealogy however, and her paralleling of texts by Victorian women and the Gnostic Gospels compounds the error by collapsing the distinction between female authored texts and texts containing feminine imagery (28), suggesting that both are revolutionary texts destined to suffer the same fate, and effectively negating their historical individuality. "Significantly," writes Jenkins, "Nightingale's spiritual design also echoes aspects of the Gnostic Gospels" (56); "Like the earlier Gnostic Gospels, Nightingale's revisionist theology proves extremely threatening to the patriarchal state and its religion; by building its truths upon individual experience and expanding access to the divine to all, these revolutionary tracts stand diametrically opposed to the foundations of the exclusivity of patriarchal authority" (57). Again, the issue of the text's lack of contemporary exposure is not addressed. Indeed, rather than subjecting it to historical scrutiny, Jenkins takes nineteenth-century individualism at face value: the voice of female experience, of the feeling subject, is in itself "threatening" to church and state, its location is irrelevant. Jenkins, then, also negates historicity, in part through an approach to genre that is overly promiscuous (equating Gnostic and Victorian texts) and that, at the same time, tends toward the construction of an overly exclusive genealogy (when preferring to read a Victorian text in the light of a Gnostic text).

Despite Jenkins's belief that she is initiating "the long overdue project of reexamining the Victorian spiritual crisis" with respect to gender (155), Janet Larson's 1991 article, "Lady-Wrestling for Victorian Soul: Discourse, Gender, and Spirituality in Women's Texts,"⁷² had already outlined an approach to these "crises that did not fit neatly into traditional definitions of faith and doubt" (Jenkins 146). Larson's nineteenth-century women writers are in conflict with the "disembodied feminine" itself;

female use of "masculine" imagery can be a way to escape typing in a misogynist society. See Caroline Walker Bynum, "...And Woman His Humanity": Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon, 1986) 257-88, passim.

⁷² Janet L. Larson, "Lady-Wrestling for Victorian Soul: Discourse, Gender, and Spirituality in Women's Texts," *Religion and Literature* 23.3 (Autumn 1991): 43-64.

Nightingale's figure of the angel in *Cassandra* is read as evidence of a "Victorian spiritual process" where "two kinds of 'Christian' discourse meet, both transformed in prophecy: the High Victorian discourse of 'feminine soul,' for which the pedestaled angel is the quasi-religious emblem; and less obviously, the 'low' female discourse of prayer from the depths" (47). Larson proposes a spirituality that arises "from the confrontation [...] between a public totalizing rhetoric and a cry of annihilation in solitude [...]" (47). Spirituality, that is, arises out of spiritual crisis, the conflict between (the discourses of) ideology and experience, and "from the strenuous engaging of public and personal languages comes attempts to forge more nearly holistic discourses of spirituality reconnecting what dominant gender ideology, moral theory, and inspirational writing had severed (public/private, flesh/spirit, body/soul, secular/religious)" (51). Larson writes that as "a woman realises her ahistoricity," her exclusion from "high" discourse, "new spiritual formation [...] has already begun." Larson's spiritual woman is ahistorical in another sense, however: Larson uses traditional Christian mysticism, the Bible, and twentieth-century feminist theologians (including Carol Christ) to understand her texts (52ff); the only nineteenth-century voices here are those of the women themselves. It is women's discourse alone that accomplishes the reembodiment of spirit: "In these conversions of received discourse emerging through women's new words, disembodied Word again becomes Flesh. Angels become prophets, and 'woman's spirituality,' escaping its domestication, takes up the burdens of history" (51). Indeed "women's spirituality" escapes historical location altogether and discourse becomes "Spirit," the "medium of God's presence," "the invisible force which blows whither it will among all people" (45). While evangelicalism provides the trope for Larson's theory—"wrestling"—no real connection is made between other "low" discourses that might have contributed to the construction of "women's experience" itself, or its voicing (woman preachers, for example); neither is the complicity of the "high" Victorian "feminine soul" in the body recognised (as espoused in the Victorian madonna for example, see above introduction 18-21).

These final two works prove the utility of a discursive approach to women's texts and provide informative readings, particularly in their understanding that, in Larson's words, "for the women in question the formation of a hermeneutics of suspicion does not necessarily entail total deconversion." Indeed, belief in a transcendent God is necessary to enable the criticism of wrong ideas about God (60). *Reclaiming Myths of Power* and "Lady-Wrestling for Victorian Soul" are also, however, examples of how "spirituality" in critical discourse can mislead or at least work against the inclusion, despite criticism's expressed desires, of the historical body.

4. Conclusion: Non-sectarian Methodologies

I began this chapter by reading Manlove's *Christian Fantasy* as a fantasy. Central to fantasy theory is the idea that works of fantasy, particularly utopias, are social critiques⁷³ which, according to Arnhelm Neustüss, expose in their contradictions the pervasiveness of the ideology the writer is attempting to reject.⁷⁴ Manlove may be innocent of such an intention but his work is nonetheless amenable to such a reading, as is that of all the non-secular critics discussed above. The male critics reveal a desire to flee from the body into the text, a desire partly impelled by the loss of male Western Christian hegemony. Jasper's apocalypse is dependent on the deconstruction of the feminine textual body, and the studied avoidance of Carol Christ's somatic feminine by all the "theology and literature" critics in their "potted histories" of the "discipline," the refusal to consider her work as "within the true," can itself be seen as another example of their unacknowledged dependence on the disembodied feminine textual body. Christ's construction of this body as existing outside such a paradigm has failed to prevent this dismemberment. The modern "spirituality" of Christ and Jasper presents a

⁷³ See, for example, Kath Filmer, introduction, *The Victorian Fantasists: Essays on Culture, Society and Belief in the Mythopoeic Fiction of the Victorian Age*, ed. Kath Filmer (New York: St Martin's, 1991) 2.

⁷⁴ See Moi 122. Neustüss believes this exposure justifies their critique.

"somatic textuality" that, while privileging one or other elements of the compound, similarly results in ahistoricity.

While secular methodologies have been more successful in reading historical bodies and texts they have also been infected by desire: Showalter is as culpable as Christ, for instance, albeit that her work privileges political rather than religious desire. More recent work that utilises discourse theory has managed to avoid the cruder failings of the sacred/secular dichotomy and has consequently proved more useful; even here, however, the relationship between body and text can still be problematic. At the extreme, Jenkins's attempt to realise nineteenth-century women's experience threatens its dissolution into non-existent bodies and texts and Larson's theory requires ahistoricity.

I am not suggesting that scholarship can be free of desire and consequently bias. Neither am I suggesting that it is necessary for scholars to commit Bloomsian patricide or Woolfian matricide in order to come of age; indeed the death of the angel is part of what is under examination. What I have tried to do in this chapter is analyse scholarly desire and, in conjunction with the introduction, provide the beginnings of an aetiology in order to identify certain methodological symptoms. It is by identifying these shared elements and their symptomatic relationship with the object of study, a project that involves a return to origins, that I believe the scholarly enterprise of religion and literature can best gain legitimacy. I have attempted to indicate that this is a matter of some urgency in the case of reading nineteenth-century women's "theology and literature" where the scholar is directly confronted with the shortcomings of the "syndrome" (and this is the case whether one is primarily concerned with "theology and literature" as a valid discipline, or an adequate historiography of nineteenth-century women and their texts). Although seemingly less affected, secular criticism must not blind itself to its involvement; in some ways because its difficulties are less blatant but nonetheless present it is more urgent that it too explores the ways in which the study and the object of study are part of a complex, linked symptomatically.

Manlove and Christ both look for a "new" incarnation which is dependent on the resolution of dualities; secular critics need to do the same in order to resurrect both the historical body and text. But this should be not so much a resolution as an interrogation of dualities: body and text, sacred and secular, materiality and spirituality, social practice and mastertexts, and so on. Christ's prescriptive rejection of critical and spiritual hierarchies is accompanied by her belief that (some) women's texts already express such a vision. Logically enough this is a non-sectarian vision in both a non-institutional and ecumenical sense: Christ/ian women are united by their sex and together will overturn the hierarchies represented by institutions and sects, replacing them with wholeness. Jasper's ecumenicism is a response to multicultural anxiety and the destruction of the logos. Wright's "metaphor" is similarly an attempt to transcend fragmentation. The "new" incarnation is in all cases a way to transcend the divisions of the body, of materiality, between the powerful and oppressed, whether in terms of gender, race or class. What it tends to do is negate the differences and resurrect a new, if inverted, ahistorical hierarchy.

To J. Hillis Miller Emily Brontë's "unity" is invalidated because "A religious myth, to be valid, must become the form of a collective belief, and permeate the culture of a group. The validity of Emily Brontë's visions depends on their being kept private."⁷⁵ Of course applying the insights of Armstrong and Davidoff and Hall regarding the necessity of privatisation of belief to middle-class hegemony and the centrality of women's texts to this process allows us to reevaluate the location of "privacy" in cultural discourse. Miller's judgement of Brontë's text also suggests the link between non-sectarianism and privacy: Brontë's individual vision erases institutionalised religion (210-11). Although I do not agree with the theologian Mary Grey's critical stance, it is nonetheless interesting that Grey reads Brontë's stance in a positive light as part of the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges" with which

⁷⁵ J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap-Harvard UP, 1963) 157. See above, introduction n9 for a fuller discussion of this work.

modern women can "redeem the [Christian] dream."⁷⁶ Whereas for Miller Brontë's text was part of a doomed tradition (see above, introduction 8n9), to Grey it is part of a feminine spiritual continuum to be read today as a kind of precursor of her ideal form of modern spirituality.

As noted in the introduction (6ff), Armstrong and Davidoff and Hall also regard such issues as non-sectarianism (and related issues such as non-doctrinal belief) as part of the privatisation of belief that leads to the rise of modern subjectivity. In order to fully comprehend this process I believe scholars must reverse the valences and suspend the progressive secularization paradigm that continues to negate a full understanding of body and text, and this, as I have explained above, involves the construction of an aetiology. The methodological symptoms already identified—the limitation of genre, the disembodied feminine and absence of "real" nineteenth-century women, the prophetic mode, Stewart's "vexed gap" between literary and social sciences (see above, introduction 22) and so on—can only be cured by a thorough investigation. The next chapter will continue this investigation by reconsidering the non-sectarian nineteenth-century woman's text, reading it in opposition to the secularization thesis as a text designed to further a social body governed by religious desire and as part of the privatisation and universalisation of theology that has resulted in the religious views of such as Grey. Rather than recreate a theology of the text or a "poetics of theology," however, a non-sectarian methodology will investigate the textuality of theology: the process by which theology was embodied and, conversely, the religious subject textualized, attempting to account for the symptoms born of this process without replicating them.

Luce Irigaray's challenge from another context provides a "fitting" motto for non-sectarian literature and theology scholars: "Don't force yourselves to repeat, don't

⁷⁶ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989).

congeal your desires in unique and definitive representations. You have so many continents to explore [...]."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Luce Irigaray, "Frenchwomen, Stop Trying," *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985) 204.

Chapter 2. The Mid-century Non-Sectarian Text: Melodrama, Religion and History. *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) and *Salem Chapel* (1863)

—that it is women who describe those sensuous raptures—that this intense appreciation of flesh and blood, this eagerness of physical sensation, is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls [...] that the class thus represented does not disown the picture—that, on the contrary, it hangs it up in boudoir and drawing-room—that the books which contain it circulate everywhere [...]. (Oliphant, "Novels," *Blackwood's* 102 [Sept. 1867]: 259)

[T]he fact that this new and disgusting picture of what professes to be the female heart, comes from the hands of women, and is tacitly accepted by them as real, is not in any way to be laughed at. (ibid 260)

[A] woman has one duty of invaluable importance to her country and her race which cannot be over-estimated—and that is the duty of being pure. (ibid 275)

In this chapter I will consider Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) and Oliphant's *Salem Chapel* (1863) as representatives of the non-sectarian nineteenth-century woman's text, and read them in opposition to the secularization thesis: as texts designed to further a social body governed by religious desire and as part of the privatisation and universalisation of theology. I will investigate the textuality of theology: the process by which theology was embodied and, conversely, the religious subject textualized.

Craik and Oliphant's texts are both classic "bourgeois" texts. *John Halifax, Gentleman* is the quintessential non-sectarian, middle-class text which Sally Mitchell has called the "epitome of an age" and one which took on the status "of a kind of testament, a personal gospel to be compared with *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *The*

Imitation of Christ".¹ *Salem Chapel*, on the other hand, is ironic. Both promote non-sectarian visions that are part of their class analyses and thus lend themselves to being considered as examples of the privatisation/secularization thesis. They have also been read as straightforwardly hegemonic texts and this approach is conjoined with attacks on artistry, their aesthetics being judged in relation to their position in the market-place. The readings of both texts that stress their hegemonic and "mercenary" character focus the question of feminine non-sectarianism and how it should be read in relation to questions of hegemony.

I will argue that the melodramatic elements of both texts need to be read in conjunction with their relationship to history in order to interrogate the significance of "non-sectarianism," and that such a reading leads us back to considering the relationship between body and text.

1. *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856). Critical Distance, Social History, and the "personal gospel": "the bounds of reverence and decorum"

Critics are largely agreed in attributing the interest of *John Halifax, Gentleman* to Craik's total lack of critical distance. Patrick Brantlinger's reading is typical: Craik's work is "One of the most interesting of the midcentury novels celebrating the triumphs of middle-class industry, because it is so unqualified in its rejoicing."² Discussions of the text tend to be completed once a scholar has noted the naïvely enthusiastic tone and summarised the plot. Paradoxically the text's naïvety is both its guarantee of interest and what makes it less interesting from the analytical point of view. *John Halifax* is, like its eponymous hero, almost unbelievably well-regulated and at one with itself, "an

¹ Sally Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik*, Twayne's English Authors Ser. 364 (Boston: Twayne, 1983) Chapter title and p.51.

² Patrick Brantlinger, "The Entrepreneurial Ideal," *The Spirit of Reform: British Literature and Politics, 1832-1867* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1977) 119.

open book" in which the contemporary literary critic struggles to find signs of subtexts or conflicting discourses.³

John Halifax documents the rise of the middle-classes; it is written as a social history, the lives of its characters closely interwoven with major political and technological events of the years 1794-1834, all of which are clearly signposted for the reader. Towards the end of the novel attention is focussed more and more on the personal life of John Halifax and his family. To a critic like Brantlinger this movement from the social to the personal indicates the end of the novel's standing as "history" and confirms its ultimate status as nostalgic bourgeois mythography: having settled its hero as county magistrate with entree into "society," and fixed the county (working-class malcontents and aristocrats alike) as subject to his moral and social rule, the tale retreats into the home and the fortunes of the next generation. A strange chronological confusion occurs here between "nostalgia"—the term consigning the "revolutionary" energy of the novel to the past—and Brantlinger's further characterisation of the novel as a "moral exemplum of Samuel Smiles."⁴ *John Halifax*, after all, was published some three years before *Self-Help*.

Robin Gilmour's discussion of the novel, although obviously indebted to Brantlinger, takes a slightly different tack. While similarly stressing the lack of critical distance Gilmour emphasises the "active" or "prescriptive" mode: *John Halifax, Gentleman* is not simply a history but a moral handbook, "the classic novel of self-help, in the sense that it presents the ideology in its purest, least critical form."⁵ As mentioned above Mitchell points out that for some readers the book functioned as a "personal gospel" and that it did so because Craik used "literary techniques that shape and guide the reader's emotional response."⁶ Far from being a simple reflection of

³ Victorian critics also retreated: Henry James wrote that "before his awful perfection and his eternal durability [referring to the novel's immense popularity] we respectfully lower our lance" (*Notes and Reviews* 1921; quoted in Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* 51).

⁴ Brantlinger 119.

⁵ Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London : Allen, 1981) 101.

⁶ Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* 45.

mid-century bourgeois self-confidence then, *John Halifax* is better read in the light of Christina Crosby's point that "one does not 'find' history, one commits historical acts."⁷ The marriages of the younger Halifaxes are indeed part of the closure of social relations that Brantlinger notes: the first (Edwin Halifax and Miss Silver, daughter of a French revolutionary) resolving the split between the middle-classes and radicalism, the second (Maud Halifax and the "Catholic" Lord Ravenal) dealing with both class and religious differences. This same pattern, of course, also makes it a textbook example of Armstrong's thesis—that women's writing played a major role in the establishment of middle-class hegemony by subsuming all socio-political differences into gender difference, translating them into questions of desire, desire that was coded as natural, universal, ahistorical and private.

The fact that *John Halifax* is both a bourgeois history and a "personal gospel" promoting what Mitchell calls a "carefully non-specific" faith⁸ makes it the perfect text with which to consider the "secularization" thesis. Mitchell's somewhat negative formulation—"carefully non-specific"—needs to be understood positively, however; Craik's text is more an agent of "religionization" than of secularization.⁹ This conclusion is reached through an analysis of Craik's manipulation of various literary genres, a consideration of the historical context and ultimately a close reading of the relationship between body and text.

The generic question is complicated by contemporary critical readings. Christina Crosby notes that "it is generally held that the disappearance of God issued in the 'discovery' of the historical, but it is less often observed that history itself is conceptualised in profoundly theological ways, imagined as the alpha and omega of

⁷ Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and "The Woman Question"* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 151.

⁸ Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* 49.

⁹ Callum G. Brown points out that any tenable theory of religious change must look at "religionization" as well as "secularization." See "A Revisionist Approach to Religious Change," *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 31.

human life." In the prevalent view God and history are mutually exclusive: in the nineteenth century "history" displaced the Divine, usurped its role as "an epistemological and an ontological principle, the determining condition of all life and therefore of all knowledge."¹⁰ *John Halifax, Gentleman* belongs to a different tradition of historiography, and, I would argue, rather than the reiteration of a nostalgic history, Craik's text is to some extent a self-conscious exercise in developing an historiography that incorporates the Divine. Moreover, this historiography works against the dominant historical "idea" in that it is profoundly feminine.

This femininity is apparent despite the fact that the text's "historian" is a male, the narrator Phineas Fletcher. It was noted at the time of publication that "it is difficult to suppress a fear that Phineas Fletcher will fall hopelessly in love with John Halifax, so hard is it to remember that Phineas is of the male sex."¹¹ Phineas is coded as feminine in many ways: he is an invalid, a feminine trait in itself and one that denies him manhood, he describes himself as "womanish."¹² His femininity gives him unique opportunities to be an historian: barred from a life of action he lives an "introverted life, which, colourless itself, had nothing to do but to reflect and retain clear images of the lives around it," and unlike "real" men he has equal access to the woman's world (e.g. 234, ch. 19). Phineas's representations of the past are thus accurate and inclusive but as the Halifax "household Solomon" (378, ch. 29) he is more than just a camera. He reflects on the course of events in an abstract as well as a specific sense, that is, he considers the workings of history and puts forward a particular theory of history that the readers are encouraged to accept as true. For Phineas the past is always present and continually the readers are reminded of the links between past and present—the many layers of history which always reveal at their heart

¹⁰ Crosby 144 and 1-2.

¹¹ [R. H. Hutton] "Novels by the Authoress of 'John Halifax,'" *North British Review* 29 (1858): 475. Quoted in Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* 47.

¹² See, for example, Dinah Mulock Craik, *John Halifax, Gentleman* (London: Nelson, n.d.) 58, ch. 5. Further references will occur in the text. The page references are to the cited edition of *John Halifax*; following Sally Mitchell's practice, which takes into account the plethora of editions, I also give chapter references.

the domestic realm. Phineas writes from within the domestic realm; emotionally involved with the Halifaxes his is a subjective and emotional view of history. He practises a feminine methodology expressed in a feminine medium (a diary, and a domestic novel), telling a feminine history, and promoting a feminine understanding of history.

Mitchell points out that Phineas's paradoxical mix of subjective and objective narration is gained by Craik's use of the Pastoral mode; Phineas's namesake and ancestor was a scholar, cleric and pastoral poet.¹³ The pastoral mode is of course perfect for Craik's purposes in that historical allegory and moral exemplum are equally part of its tradition. Specifically Craik is reworking the tradition of the Christian Pastoralists, with John Halifax as the symbol of Christ on earth, and nostalgically representing Arcadia, the Halifax home, as a touchstone with which to judge both the early nineteenth-century society represented in the novel, and, as I will argue, mid-century society itself. With the use of the pastoral Craik situates Phineas's history, his Truth, the constant revisitation of the domestic, firmly within the Christian tradition. Phineas as nostalgic pastoral poet evokes the pathos of mutability, but always to point to the Christian constant that inspires the temporal stage:

In the home-light.

It was a scene—glowing almost as those evening pictures at Longfield. Those pictures, photographed on memory by the summer sun of our lives, and which no paler after-sun could have the power to reproduce. Nothing earthly is ever reproduced in the same form. I suppose Heaven meant it to be so; that in the perpetual progression of our existence we should be reconciled to loss, and taught that change itself is but another form for aspiration. Aspiration which never can rest, or ought to rest, in anything short of the One absolute Perfection—the One all-

¹³ Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* 48.

satisfying Good "*in whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*" (419, ch. 32, italics original).

Craik uses the weight of her principal actors' "last words" with which to confirm Phineas's understanding. The dying John reaffirms the need to "recognize and submit to the universal law of change" and again reveals the constant that lies at the heart of this law by quoting John 8:14: "whither we go we know, and the Way we know—the same yesterday, today, and for ever" (533, ch. 40). As Ursula prepares to join her husband on what will be their final marriage-bed she confirms the implication of the domestic in this eternal return to the same, bidding her children to "never forget your father. You must do as he wishes, and live as he lived—in all ways" (536, ch. 40).

This return is part of what Crosby calls "the melodramatic fix, the repetitious, incessant effort to domesticate difference, to display an over-arching moral order that informs all phenomena."¹⁴ Conflict in the public realm is continuously resolved by an appeal to the private, and the private provides the public with its ultimate signification. This kind of epistemology is that which Peter Brooks notes as the incipient modern aesthetic to be found in post-Revolutionary French melodrama: the "'sublimity' of melodramatic rhetoric [is] the emphatic articulation of simple truths and relationships, the clarification of the cosmic moral sense of everyday gestures."¹⁵ This clarification of the drama of the everyday is necessary because melodrama

comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern. [...] the word is called upon to make present and to impose a new society, to legislate the regime of virtue. [...] While its social implications may be variously

¹⁴ Crosby 75.

¹⁵ Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976) 13-14.

revolutionary or conservative, it is in all cases radically democratic, striving to make its representations clear and legible to everyone. We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era.¹⁶

Craik deliberately situates her mid-century text within this critical time-frame, opening the novel in the autumn of 1794 with the close of the Terror in France and the diminution of panic in England. She also includes characters with direct links to Revolutionary France: Lady Caroline, "brought up in the impious atrocities of France" (193, ch. 16), and Miss Silver who is really Louise Eugénie d'Argent, daughter of "D'Argent the Bonnet Rouge" (424, ch. 32), "one of the most 'blatant beasts' of the Reign of Terror. A fellow without honesty, conscience, or even common decency" (425, ch. 32). England itself teeters on the brink of social and moral dissolution:

It was the year 1800 [...]. The present generation can have no conception of what a terrible time that was—War, Famine, and Tumult stalking hand-in-hand, and no one to stay them. For between the upper and lower classes there was a great gulf fixed; the rich ground the faces of the poor, the poor hated, yet meanly succumbed to, the rich. Neither had Christianity enough boldly to cross the line of demarcation, and prove, the humbler, that they were men—the higher and wiser, that they were gentlemen. (81, ch. 7)

Of course with John Halifax Craik provides us with the type of resolution: the true revolutionary as "gentleman." That this is first and foremost a cosmic status, not primarily a function of class, is indicated by the almost synecdochical relationship between John and his Greek Testament—wherein his identity is inscribed—and the

¹⁶ Brooks 15.

later recognition by Ursula "that a Christian only can be a true gentleman" (209, ch. 17), the terms are synonymous.¹⁷ Craik presents the French Revolution as the antithesis of the real Revolution, where "liberty, fraternity, and equality," "words, in themselves true and lovely, but wrested to such false meaning" (282, ch. 23), are embodied in the domestic life of the Halifaxes, and their significance grounded in the True "*in whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning*" (James 1:17). This anti-Revolution replaces the mob and the amoral Bonnet Rouge with the Christian family headed by a gentle man (e.g. 27, ch. 3), and a culture governed by mercy is substituted for a reign of Terror and violent retribution. Craik's argument is not with Revolutionary France in itself (although at the time of writing 1848 was only in the recent past), English history is also shown to be soaked in blood due to the divisions of the social body, a metaphor that Craik regularly literalizes. As youths Phineas and John explore a countryside littered with the remains of Romans, Britons, Danes, Yorkists and Lancastrians; they cross hayfields that were once monastery vineyards, "watered by a darker stream than the blood of grapes" (62). That John's first inscription of his own name is on the body of this sepulchral "Mother Earth" (49, ch. 4) is annunciatory of a new age in which the Word will replace spilt blood and smashed bones, and the united body of the Church (in its broadest sense) replace the body at war with itself.

As we have already noted, Brooks's theory of melodrama relies on the notion of a "post-sacred era." This is a "world voided of its traditional Sacred, where the body of the ethical has become a sort of *deus absconditus* which must be sought for, postulated, brought into man's existence through the play of the spiritualist imagination" (11). The melodramatic mode, which relocates ethics in the individual psychic domain, replaces tragedy which is now impossible because of its dependence on "the communal partaking of the sacred body—as in the mass" (16). Craik's use of melodrama can be understood in opposition to Brooks's not simply because she is

¹⁷ For discussions of the significance of "gentleman" see Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* 44, and Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel*.

reliant on a Christian epistemology/historiography in the general sense, but because she suggests that the sacred era with its associated communal body has yet to exist. The communal body is constructed according to a shared discourse of the divine, and it is precisely this, not the Divine itself, that Craik posits as absent and writes into existence. The process begins with the textual construction of a communal body of readers. This reading body is constructed through the careful deployment of narrative strategies designed to elicit particular emotional responses, reader identification, and the use of a domestic setting which Mitchell argues is primarily to ensure the accessibility of the text, a project that was successful.¹⁸

Within the text Craik utilises the simultaneously domestic and Biblical trope of the shared meal to trace the advent of the communal body and its participation in the sacred body. From the starvation and violent divisiveness of the Bread Riots through to the mill-workers' feast at Longfield as a kind of agape in Arcadia, Craik traces the increasing social unification which is dependent on and equivalent to the domestic incarnation of the sacred text and body. The Longfield agape is a tableau or parable designed to illustrate the results of John and Ursula's faith and site of one of the few direct descriptions of that faith in the novel. It is fundamentally a non-sectarian faith: "As to what doctrinal creed we held, or what sect we belonged to, I can give but the plain answer which John gave to all such inquiries—that we were *Christians*" (320, ch. 25, italics original). The non-sectarian faith is centred on the reading and incorporation of the New Testament into domestic life, "the father's and mother's daily life, which was a literal carrying out" of the Word. This literalization of the sacred text is the way to "cross the line of demarcation," collapsing the distinctions between public and private, rich and poor, Catholic and Quaker, Conservative and Radical. All are incorporated into a unified body where "*One is your Master—even Christ, and all ye are brethren*" (Matt. 23:8; 320, italics original).

¹⁸ Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* 49 and 50.

Craik's theology, then, is fundamentally non-sectarian, concerned with realising a unified Christian body. As a theological "system" it has two principal sites: the sacred text and the human body. Knowledge of and participation in the sacred—holiness—involves a relationship between these sites, a reading of the text through the body. Craik's central symbol of the unified Christian body (the body in relationship with the text) is marriage, a sacramental rather than a civil state: "In marriage there must be perfect unity—one aim, one faith, one love—or the marriage is incomplete, unholy—a mere civil contract and no more" (484, ch. 36). The marriage of Ursula and John is the exemplum of this perfect unity, human marriage in concord with the Law of the Father; their relationship goes beyond "human passion": "these two recognized each in the other one aim, one purpose, one faith; something higher than love, something better than happiness" (209, ch. 27). Nonetheless, marriage introduces the matter of human desire into the picture.

I have said that the Longfield agape is one of the few direct expressions of "non-sectarianism" in the novel. When spoken from the body language is suspect, words can be wrested to false meaning, they can be divisive, because they are expressive of the self alone. Phineas speaks of the "invariably foolish habit of keeping a diary" (23, ch. 3). But the body in harmony with the text speaks another language. Ursula and John are linguistically circumspect, expressing themselves through action. Phineas tells us that Ursula "did not express her feelings after the fashion of most women"; John "only spoke when he had something to say; and [...] in the most concise and appropriate manner that suggested itself" (315, ch. 24; 150, ch. 12). Their blind daughter Muriel, "an embodied Peace" (263, ch. 22), has a soft speaking voice and her "real" voice, "Muriel's voice," is sacred keyboard music. With this voice she "utters" one of the crucial expressions of theology in the text, the transposition of the Dies Irae into Handel's "I know that my Redeemer liveth," signalling the replacement of a God of retribution with the God of Love and mercy (352, ch. 27). Ursula and John's mutual recognition is expressed physically: through touch and gaze (209, ch. 17). When false labels threaten to part them—John describing Ursula as a

gentlewoman and himself as a tradesman—physical touch confirms true meaning. John recognises the true sense in which Ursula is a gentlewoman, that is a Christian, by kissing the scar on her arm, a scar left from when as a child Ursula had been prevented from trying to give the unknown young John some bread (ch. 1). Kissing the scar is also a form of betrothal (172, ch. 14 and ch. 15). This episode seems to fit Armstrong's thesis particularly well: social difference is resolved into the sexual. The sexual resolution, however, is made clearly dependent on the Christian body. Ursula's wound, suffered in the discharge of true Christianity, relates her to an earlier Ursula and the martyred Christian body.¹⁹ And behind her namesake lies on the one hand the original female body, Eve, marked with the consequences of desire, and on the other, the original Christian body, marked with the wounds of religious passion. Here and elsewhere desire is returned to the Word, "the Book he had taught all his children to long for and to love" (369, ch. 28), the source of all meaning and the end of all desire.

To Brooks the utterance of desire in the post-sacred era is

The rhetorical breaking-through of repression [...and] closely linked to melodrama's central effort to locate and articulate the moral problems in which it deals. Ethical imperatives in the post-sacred universe have been sentimentalized, have come to be identified with emotional states and psychic relationships, so that the expression of emotional and moral integers is indistinguishable. Both are perhaps best characterized as moral sentiments. Desire cries aloud its language in identification with full states of being. [...] Desire triumphs over the world of substitute-formations and detours, it achieves plenitude of meaning.²⁰

Craik uses rhetorical excess at a number of points in the novel but always desire is brought back to the sacred narrative: either desire speaks the Word itself, allying itself

¹⁹ An early British princess reputedly martyred along with 11,000 other virgins. Both religious and sexual passion are required of the nineteenth-century Ursula.

²⁰ Brooks 41.

with its proper object (as with John's outburst at the Jessops, ch. 17, when his claim to social equality is presented as an instance of "turning the other cheek") or it is judged with respect to that Word (as with Lady Caroline's desire to join her lover, where Caroline's melodramatic identification of "emotional and moral integers" is falsified).²¹ Desire is contained by the text but this is not so much an attempt to impose repression (indeed in some respects it fulfils Brooks's "breaking through" function, for instance in respect to class differences) as a reversal of Brooks's central thesis—all is already contained within the text. A full state of being is one where text and body are in harmony. The word is incorporated not excreted.

Craik's domestic theology makes desire essential to the achievement of "plenitude of meaning": indeed the new order, symbolised by John and Ursula's marriage—"Adam and Eve modernized" (290, ch. 23)—cannot be realised without it. Although Craik explores the problem of desire in relation to both men and women it is female desire she makes central. If Ursula had failed to accept John—and for a time this seems likely—the new Christian society would lack "the Mother" (264, ch. 22). Ultimately, like Mary's, Ursula's acceptance of her destiny seems to be already written (see Phineas on marriages made in heaven and John's vision [217 and 218, ch. 18]). Like Eve, adult women are "marked" with an excess of desire closely identified with their maternal function.²² These marks are equivocal, coding women as repositories of strong desires that are constitutive of spiritual strength—a spiritual power thus rooted in their womanhood—and also of "violent passions." Phineas's maternal stand-in, for example, is a staunch Quaker named Jael whose biblical namesake is famed for hammering a tent-peg into the head of the Canaanite captain Sisera (Judges 4:17-24, 5:24-27). The line between spiritual strength and violence is blurred. Ursula is the "truest type of motherhood" (264, ch. 22), but her maternal emotions are likened to

²¹ Caroline argues that her lover "loves me, and I love him. That is the true marriage" (295, ch. 23).

²² Muriel is significantly left unscarred by the smallpox; dying in girlhood she is touched only by "The Hand" of God.

"wildness" and savagery (see 329-30, ch. 25 and 365, ch. 28).²³ This maternal excess is managed according to the Word: "thy desire shall be unto thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Gen. 3:16). Ursula's cousin Caroline shows how female desire when outside the Christian structure—"No home!—no husband!—no God!" (294, ch. 23) and no child—is as much of a threat to that structure as it is a keystone when within it. Thus far Craik's portrayal of women's spirituality, with its Madonna/Magdalen symbiosis, seems typical of mid-century gender ideology. Closer attention to the motif of "marks," however, and a careful analysis of Craik's *Fallen Woman* and her relationship with the maternal complicates an over-easy reading of Craik's relationship with hegemony.

The "marks" of desire, of violence, are inscriptions, ultimately linking women into the divine narrative. Within the novel, however, Craik chooses to foreground Lady Macbeth (encountered by John and Phineas in ch. 6) as a central metaphor with which to interpret the variously marked women. That Craik chooses to present Lady Macbeth, the antithesis of maternity, sympathetically as a strong and tragic figure, leaving the negative aspects of the character to be provided by the reader's knowledge of context, is highly significant and produces readings of the female characters that form a kind of subversive subtext to her central thesis. Ursula's simultaneously Christian and Shakespearean "moment," for example, the self-inflicted knife-wound, occurs in childhood; with marriage and motherhood Ursula subordinates her will to her husband. The adult Ursula has become "the Mother," and as a consequence has lost her autonomy and a good deal of her attractiveness as a character. It is Caroline who is most closely linked with Lady Macbeth, located at the nexus of power and desire.

Caroline is a "player" on the stages of history and melodrama. An English aristocrat and habituée of French and Neapolitan circles and close friend of Lady Hamilton (who makes a brief appearance in the novel) Caroline represents the *Ancien Régime*, both English and Continental, and its failings. She also represents the world

²³ Craik's exploration of the problem of male desire can itself be understood according to maternal excess. That Guy and Edwin fight like "Cain and Abel" over Louise is partially attributable to Guy being most like Ursula (442, ch. 33).

of contemporary politics. She is the novel's speaker of "*Liberté—fraternité—égalité*" and yearns, she says, for "the rich flesh-and-blood life of the people" (201, ch. 17). Like Phineas Caroline is an astute spectator of shifting tableaux: recognising John's superiority (202, ch. 17) and appreciative of the Halifax Arcadia (283, ch. 23). But Caroline sees the Pastoral only as play: "I would turn shepherdess myself, if we could find a tolerable Arcadia" (285, ch. 23). And drawing on her "chameleon power" (289, ch. 23) she does, for a time, washing off her rouge. Caroline is the principal player in the events of the two central chapters of the novel: the first a melodramatic revelation of her adultery with Gerard Vermilye, the Tory candidate put up by Caroline's husband and father, and the second the impact this has on history, as John exposes the corruption of the Kingswell election (ch. 23 and 24). In the desires of Caroline Craik allies private and public immorality, sex and politics, and with John's triumphant naming of sin—"the one law, which if you disown it as God's is still man's—being necessary for the peace, honour, and safety of society." [...] '*Thou shalt not commit adultery*'" (296, ch. 23, italics original)—the middle-class man makes political history and the impure woman is banished from history, unmentioned even by the Halifaxes (474, ch. 36).

Crosby writes that "History" as the episteme and woman's alterity as its guarantee is inseparable from the construction of the middle-class subject and middle-class hegemony. She notes that "the violence done to women [and others] in the name of history" is inescapable, "required by the politics of a certain production of knowledge."²⁴ Caroline's body is the site for the contest between the laws of the fathers—bruised by her husband's violence and branded by the sacred commandment; like Lady Macbeth's, Caroline's sin leads to madness and death. *John Halifax* was published in the year preceding the Divorce Act of 1857 and Craik's Caroline is thus to be read as a contribution to contemporary debate over the "women problem" with particular reference to the question of divorce. Craik believed that adultery was sin,

²⁴ Crosby 7 and 8.

and while mistreated wives had a right and even a duty to separate from their husbands, divorce was inconceivable. Caroline has done violence to society by breaking "the one law." The purity of women is central to the advent of the Christian society.

But "Poor Caroline!" is a tragic figure: exiled from Arcadia—"No home!—No husband!—No God!" (294, ch. 23), "a woman cruelly wronged" (293, ch. 23). Craik was well aware that divorce favoured men: Richard Brithwood divorces Caroline, and Vermilye marries a younger woman leaving Caroline as nothing. Caroline desires presence—"rich flesh-and-blood life"—but with "a temperament so plastic and weak—so easily remoulded by the very next influence that fate might throw across her perilous way" (297, ch. 23) she is trapped within the play where "Life's but a walking shadow [...] a tale / Told by an idiot [...] Signifying nothing." Caroline lives within the melodramatic and is inscribed with its rhetoric: speaking her desires and playing various roles, she confuses presence and wholeness with passion and division.

Caroline is also a tragicomic figure. Craik utilises the tragicomic to portray a world which can overcome division and comfortably contain both high and low, a genre in which "god is as lawful [...] as in a tragedy, and mean people as in a comedy."²⁵ It is a genre with which Craik attempts to reinstate the middle-condition excluded by melodrama,²⁶ to construct a unified middle-class subject that can function in the world according to the laws of both man and God, that can itself incorporate both high and low. Caroline's body, as the principle locus of conflict and confusion, maps the tensions of the tragicomic world, and with Caroline's reappearance in history as street spectacle (ch. 36) the tensions of this body irrupt into carnival. This is a world upside down—the aristocrat reviled by the people, the "lady" as street entertainment. Caroline's staged melodramas, her self-conscious use of inversion and parody, her

²⁵ John Fletcher (the historical Phineas Fletcher's cousin) in the preface to *The Faithful Shepherdess*.

²⁶ "The world according to melodrama is built on an irreducible manichaeism, the conflict of good and evil and opposites not subject to compromise. [...] The middle ground and the middle condition are excluded" (Brooks 36).

feminist irruptions,²⁷ her disruptive incursions into Arcadia (e.g. 283, ch. 23), all have turned on her; from speaking the "culture of laughter" Caroline has become the laughing stock herself, her humming of "*ça ira*" (206, ch. 17) transposed into screams of "'Canaille!'" This is carnival as nightmare: "the poetic torments of Dante's 'Inferno,' or the tangible fire and brimstone of many a blind but honest Christian's hell" (501, ch. 37).

The street Caroline is reminiscent of Bakhtin's "grotesque body"—impure, dressed eccentrically and indecently, a parody of her younger self, a confusion of life and death, the clown: "what a face it was!—withered, thin, sallow almost to deathliness, with a bright rouge spot on each cheek, a broad smile on the ghastly mouth" (500, ch. 37). Certainly she is opposed to Ursula's and John's "classical body": her multiplicity to their unity, her madness to their reason, her melodramatic rhetoric to their economy of utterance, her passion to their love. Seemingly Caroline is confirmed as "the marginal, the low and the outside from the perspective of a classical body situated as high, inside and central." According to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White this is how the bourgeois subject constructs itself, "by virtue of its very exclusions."²⁸ But Ursula, encouraged by John to do "'What only a woman can do—a woman like you, and in your position'" (502, ch. 37), reincorporates the fallen woman into the bourgeois family, providing us with another "melodramatic fix, the repetitious, incessant effort to domesticate difference, to display an over-arching moral order that informs all phenomena."²⁹

Stallybrass and White argue that what is excluded in order to construct the "'neutral', 'middling', 'democratic', 'rational' subject" becomes part of the bourgeois Imaginary, the political unconscious. The multitude of excluded voices continue to

²⁷ Caroline rejects the notion of male "'marital supremacy'" (234, ch. 14), for example, and queries the sexual double standard epitomised in the marriage of the Prince and Princess of Wales (286, ch. 23).

²⁸ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986) 23.

²⁹ Crosby 75.

trouble the subject, however, thus effectively forestalling its attempt to construct itself as a purified perspective. Furthermore, because of its innate dependency on the existence of Others, the subject's social democratic project is rendered not only unachievable, but indeed undesirable. A further cause for self-division is the recognition of the subject's own fears and desires in the Other (199-201). While the impure woman needs to be excluded from Craik's heaven on earth/Christian polity, maternal excess makes all women complicit in this body and Craik foregrounds rather than represses this complicity, justifying it with reference to the divine text. Caroline is not entirely Other: she is a kinswoman of course but more significantly she is a woman, and Ursula's recognition of this sisterhood is in accordance with divine action (502, ch. 37); it is a recognition of their similarly inscribed bodies. And yet Caroline's reabsorption into the bourgeois family is not exactly a negation of her difference; she dies unrepentant: "she was dead, and had 'made no sign,' either of repentance, grief, or gratitude. Unless one could consider as such [...] some feeble murmur about 'William—poor William!'" (504, ch. 38). With this expression of care for her younger brother Caroline is not "confessed" of her sins, but she has realised the Christian body—the maternal expression of female desire. And this, according to Craik, is enough:

the wretched life, once beautiful and loveful, was now ended, or perhaps born in some new sphere to begin again its struggle after the highest beauty, the only perfect love. What are we that we should place limits to the infinite mercy of the Lord and Giver of life, unto whom all life returns? (504, ch. 38)

Ultimately Divine mercy breaks through the logic of history and John's version of the law of the Fathers. In attempting to reinstitute the middle-condition, to create the Christian subject, Craik suggests that rigid gender barriers also stand in the way of the unified Christian body. She "cross-dresses" characters: tender men and violent women. In her attempt to reinvent the maternal she negotiates divine and social "texts,"

rejecting the perfect maternal (Ursula is not an angel but "'better than that, a woman!'" [212, ch. 18]), including the impure woman, and giving a crucial place to female passion in spirituality.³⁰ In some respects the subversive aspect of carnival, carnival as critique, is apparent in Craik's theology. Craik attempts to wrest the elevation of the physical and the breakdown of distinctions from the chaos of the unholy/secular (the French Revolution for instance) and reinstitute them as part of the Christian order, exploring, one might say, the ramifications of Galatians 3:28 ("neither male nor female [...] all one in Jesus Christ"). In so doing Craik is working the boundaries between unification and transgression, a dangerous project and one that often results in her undermining, or at least failing to fully realise her own project. Whereas Brooks's melodrama replaces the rite of sacrifice,³¹ for example, Craik somewhat paradoxically sacrifices her "embodied peace," an incongruity arising in part from the attempt to read the female body in the light of the divine text.³² The "slippage" involved in creating the textualized subject/embodied theology—between God the Father and "what all fathers

³⁰ Crosby writes that in melodrama the "maternal woman—who once was present but is now absent—is at the center of the [ethical] system," she is the "vanishing point" around which social history is ordered (9). All of the major characters are motherless at the beginning of the novel and John's mother in particular fits Crosby's schema, her "absence" (death) inscribed in John's Greek Testament. But Craik's domestic theology demands the literal presence of the maternal woman and Craik explores aspects of the maternal most obviously with Ursula, Muriel (named after John's mother), and Caroline (the antithesis). The prepubescent Muriel is the pure maternal, a perfected version of Ursula: John's "good angel; the visible embodiment of the best half of his soul" (265, ch. 22). But Muriel is soon dead, the perfect maternal, it seems, can only exist elsewhere.

³¹ Brooks 206.

³² Muriel's death provides Ursula with

the utmost sorrow and crowning consecration of motherhood—that of yielding up her child, a portion of her own being, to the corruption of the grave—of resigning the life which out of her own life had been created, unto the Creator of all.

Surely, distinct and peculiar from every other grief, every other renunciation, must be that of a woman who is thus chosen to give her very flesh and blood, the fruit of her own womb, unto the Lord!

This dignity, this sanctity, seemed gradually to fall upon the mourning mother [...]. (373, ch. 28)

Elaine Showalter writes that "like George Eliot, she [Craik] tried to put women back in touch with their suffering, with their everyday tragedies" ("Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment: A Case Study in Victorian Female Authorship," *Feminist Studies* 2 [1975]: 13). In this case the everyday tragedy is revealed as an intertext of the cosmic narrative where motherhood and maternal affect are shaped and controlled by the Law of the Father. If Muriel's death elevates Ursula to a Madonna, it humbles John, who is reminded by the death of "his first-born and his dearest" (265, ch. 22) that he may be God's representative on earth, but the Heavenly Father's claims must always be paramount.

should be—[His] truest representative here on earth" (287, ch. 23), for example—potentially contributes to the process of secularization and the representation of both history and theology according to Irigaray's "specular logic of the same" in which the masculine is confirmed as the only model of subjectivity.³³ But Craik's *Divine* is not simply reducible to the mirror-image of the bourgeois father; like the feminine it is also situated elsewhere, outside this logic of the same, beyond specular representation. The Epistle of James represents the word unaccompanied by works as "like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass" (James 1:23); Craik's text suggests that domesticity, which involves the reincorporation of the feminine and life lived in accordance with the word, means that the eternal return to the same is not limited by specular logic. God, "*in whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning*" is also, writes the sacred text, "the perfect law of liberty" (James 1:17, 25, 2:12).

That Craik's attempt to embody theology and simultaneously delimit the divine is limited and shot through with ambivalence is unsurprising given the ideological constraints of her day. *John* is often read as Craik in trousers, but when *John Halifax* is read as a religious novel, Mr Charles the actor (ch. 5) seems a more apt persona for her, his parody of Methodist open-air preaching a metaphor for Craik's novel: "in no way did he trespass the bounds of reverence and decorum. His harangue, though given as a sermon, was strictly and simply a moral essay [...]" (66, ch. 5). Craik's "carefully non-specific faith," although a theological system in itself and one that she carefully distinguishes as specific (opposing it to Lord Ravenal's vague Universalism), allows her to say with the actor: "I never meddled with theology—only common morality. You cannot say I did" (68, ch. 5). But Craik is playing the part of a theological ingénue, justifying her "meddling" *with* theology: "What are we that we should place limits" to God?

³³ Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* 133.

Ursula's instructions to her children to "never forget your father," where "father" shifts ambiguously between heaven and earth, provide an excellent example of this "slippage" (see above 70).

2. *Salem Chapel* (1863). Sensationalism: Smoking Lamps and the "carnal mind"

Artistically it is a failure. Her interesting hero becomes enmeshed in a crudely melodramatic plot almost totally obscuring the important issues of the book. (Vineta Colby and Robert A. Colby, *The Equivocal Virtue* 49)

Salem Chapel suffers badly from the sensational plot, which sits ill at ease with the comic realism with which the Dissenting milieu of its setting is depicted. (Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 5)

Melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue. It demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible. [...] [it is] the drama of morality: it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to "prove" the existence of a moral universe which, though put into question, masked by villainy and perversions of judgement, does exist and can be made to assert its presence and its categorical force among men. (Brooks 20)

Hectic rebellion against nature—frantic attempts by any kind of black art or mad psychology to get some grandeur and sacredness restored to life—or if not sacredness and grandeur, at least horror and mystery, there being nothing better in earth or heaven [...]. (Oliphant, "Sensation Novels," *Blackwood's* 91 [May 1862: 565])

Despite her prodigious output of fiction (98 novels and over 50 short stories), for over half a century Oliphant's posthumous appearances were largely in her role as

critic, seldom as a writer worth reviewing in her own right.³⁴ Although many scholars have merely treated the Oliphantian critical voice as itself a quaint piece of social history, usually illustrative of Victorian moral outrage and conservatism,³⁵ others have read the critical voice as a hermeneutic for her fiction, and Oliphant the novel writer as a social historian. In Robert Wolff's introductory volume to the Garland series of Victorian Novels of Faith and Doubt, for example, Oliphant is characterised as "a cool and observant reporter,"³⁶ her "Chronicles of Carlingford" providing "an Outsider's View" of English religious history. To Wolff, Oliphant is a reasonably reliable, because non-partisan, social historian. In addition *Salem Chapel* is to be commended for "its pioneering sociological explorations."³⁷ To Valentine Cunningham, however, Oliphant's distance from her subject, her "consistent evasion of close imaginative engagement" results in "ignorance of the problem and the issues," rendering *Salem Chapel* highly unreliable as social history and moreover, revealing Oliphant's "distance" as motivated by sectarian and class bigotry.³⁸ Unlike Craik's presumed

³⁴ Even her first biographers considered that "Her gifts as a writer—unlimited energy and industry, a capacity for enormous reading, adaptability to almost any subject-matter, and a shrewd critical sense—were indeed better suited to non-fiction than to fiction." The Colbys characterise Oliphant as "something of an apostle of culture to the magazine reading public." See Vineta Colby and Robert A. Colby, *The Equivocal Virtue: Mrs Oliphant and the Victorian Market-Place* (New York: Archon, 1966) 183 and xii-xiii. See also Robert Colby and Vineta Colby, "Mrs Oliphant's Scotland. The Romance and the Reality," *Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Campbell (Manchester: Carcanet-Scottish, 1979) 92.

³⁵ Many of these appearances were not complimentary. The scholarly neglect of Oliphant as a writer is, in fact, partly attributed to her role as critic by several contemporary scholars. Her reviews of Hardy in particular, famously dismissed by him as the "screaming of a poor lady in *Blackwood's*," did not aid her reputation. See for example John Stock Clarke, "The Paradoxes of Oliphant's Reputation," *Margaret Oliphant: Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive*, ed. D. J. Trela (Selinsgrove: Susquehan UP; London: Associated University Presses, 1995) 33-48.

³⁶ Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (New York: Garland, 1977) 198.

³⁷ Wolff 333. In a brief discussion of *The Rector* and *The Doctor's Family*, Lance St John Butler considers Oliphant's critical "distance"—because of its lack of "religious or anti-religious *parti pris*"—as particularly, if unconsciously, revelatory of the ubiquity of doubt in Victorian discourse; Oliphant does not simply criticise specific forms of Christianity, rather "she so works things as to undermine faith, albeit obliquely." Butler does not seem to realise that Oliphant's critique might be "radically infidel" with respect to gender here, rather than expressing a general "metaphysical anxiety" (*Victorian Doubt: Literary and Cultural Discourses* [Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990] 15-16, 9).

³⁸ Valentine Cunningham, "Mrs. Oliphant and the Tradition," *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 233, 239, 236.

identification with her text then, both positive and negative estimations of Oliphant's success as a social historian rely on the acknowledgement of her critical distance.

Critics read *Salem Chapel*, whether positively or negatively, as social history, that is, as an example of Realism, a mimetic text. As Margarete Rubik has recently noted, however, "Oliphant is, in fact, a much more vigorous and unconventional novelist than most critics allow."³⁹ Very early in the text it becomes apparent that *Salem* is a hybrid—a combination of Realism and the Prose Romance, and within this Romance the melodramatic predominates. Much of *Salem Chapel* is, in fact, classic melodrama: "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety."⁴⁰ Judging the novel according to Realist decorum, critics invariably, and perhaps inevitably, read *Salem Chapel*'s melodramatic elements as extraneous to the tale of a young dissenting minister and his "flock": as an unfortunate aesthetic blunder, as a pandering to the literary market-place, a perfect instance of what Woolf called literary prostitution.⁴¹ Without wishing to occlude melodrama's relationship with the market-place (an important theme in *Salem*) I believe critical attention should be guided by the predominance of the melodramatic in the novel. As with Craik, if we understand melodrama after Brooks "as a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force," "as a sense-making system,"⁴² and conjoin this with an awareness of melodrama's role in history (particularly literary history),

³⁹ Margarete Rubik, "The Subversion of Literary Clichés in Oliphant's Fiction," Trela 49-65.

⁴⁰ Brooks 11-12.

⁴¹ "Mrs Oliphant sold her brain, her very admirable brain, prostituted her culture and enslaved her intellectual liberty in order that she might earn her living and educate her children [...]" (Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* [London: Hogarth, 1938] 166). Even Margarete Rubik,^{wh} her emphasis on the over-all accuracy of Oliphant's depiction of Dissent, writes that "[a]t least no reviewer fails to lament how Oliphant spoils the amusing scenes of the Nonconformist congregation in *Salem Chapel* by introducing the muddled melodrama of the Mildmay-plot" (*The Novels of Mrs. Oliphant: A Subversive View of Traditional Themes*, Writing About Women 8 [New York: Lang, 1994] 72).

⁴² Brooks xiii.

again we find, and much more specifically than in Craik, the genre being appropriated to an anti-secular conception. Unlike Craik, however, Oliphant's social realism does not subsume the means of production and the market-place into mythography. In a reversal of John Halifax's triumphant progress, and through an humiliating self-analysis of the differences between himself and the perpetual curate of St Roque's, Arthur Vincent soon discovers "that external circumstances do stand for something."⁴³ This first awareness of the intransigence of class differences occurs outside Master's Bookshop, alerting us to Oliphant's inclusion of literary production as itself central to her text. Similarly, theology is presented as both enmeshed in the market-place and as struggled for; there is no direct correlation between the Word and human bodies and institutions. Theologically, Oliphant centres the debate around Providence, and depicts the struggle for faith as a struggle with and for signification in the secular, melodramatic world where significance is unclear.

Whereas *John Halifax* appeared in the heyday of the domestic novel, by the time *Salem Chapel* was published the era of the Sensation Novel was underway.⁴⁴ Oliphant's text is often included among the sensation novels of the 1860s; despite the popularity of the work, however, Oliphant appears in recent critical discussions of sensationalism as a critic, but, following the pattern noted above, never as an author. While Oliphant greatly admired Wilkie Collins she attacked female exponents of the "Sensation School" in an 1867 review, appalled by their "fleshly" rendition of "the feminine soul."⁴⁵ Oliphant attacked the materialism of the genre, a materialism located in women's bodies. Her criticisms were representative: "As the term 'sensation' novel itself suggests, the critics feared the prospect of a reader reduced to a body reacting

⁴³ Margaret Oliphant, *Salem Chapel* (1863), 2 vols. in one, Victorian Fiction: Novels of Faith and Doubt (New York: Garland, 1976) vol. 1: 28. Further references will occur in the text.

⁴⁴ But Craik's novel contained the seeds; *John Halifax* can be read as a "proto" genre, with Caroline and especially Louise as prototypes of the sensational heroine: disruptive, disguised, with dubious pasts. By the end of the text, as in the Sensation novel, home appears as the site of change and of disruption.

⁴⁵ Oliphant, "Novels," *Blackwood's* 102 (Sept. 1867): 259.

instinctively to a text."⁴⁶ As Oliphant makes clear in the quotations that open this chapter (see above, 84) it was the "natural" relationship drawn between female representations of female materiality (or sexuality) and the female reader that produced critical opprobrium. As Lyn Pykett writes, quoting from the *Christian Remembrancer* ("Our Female Sensation Novelists," vol. 46, 1863, 209-36):

contemporary reviewers repeatedly identified sensation fiction as a form of writing the body, and hence as a deviation from the proper feminine. The sensation novel was also assigned to the domain of the improper feminine because of the way it *read* the body, or *produced a reading* in the body, by its "appeal to the nerves rather than to the heart," to the animal passions and instincts rather than to the reason:

"This lower level, this drop from the empire of reason and self-control, is to be traced throughout this class of literature, which is a constant appeal to the animal part of our nature, and avows a preference for its manifestation, as though power and intensity come through it."⁴⁷

An analysis of the relationship between Oliphant's use of melodrama and the sensation novel is crucial to understanding the relationship between her stance as a critic and her literary production, a relationship closer than is often supposed.⁴⁸ *Salem*

⁴⁶ Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1992) 20.

⁴⁷ Lyn Pykett, *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992) 35. Italics original.

⁴⁸ The relationship between Oliphant's critical and fictional work is complex and the tendency of critics to see it as one of opposition is misleadingly simplistic, producing readings of Oliphant that echo that of George Augustus Sala, who was commissioned by Braddon to respond to Oliphant's 1867 review. Unaware of the reviewer's identity, Sala's accusations of "the worst kind of cant, hypocrisy, and sophistry" were actually directed toward English literature in general. See George Augustus Sala, "The Cant of Modern Criticism," *Belgravia* 4.1 (Nov. 1867): 45-55. Quoted in Robert Lee Wolff, *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon* (New York: Garland, 1979) 206.

Chapel is about "sensationalism" more than it is a technical example of the genre. In fact Oliphant returns to a more "pure" melodrama in order to reclaim territory, "the feminine soul" and body, from the female sensationalists. *Salem's* "sensational" subplot fits the classic melodramatic structure as adumbrated by Brooks,⁴⁹ and departs at significant points from Sensationalism. A "straight-forward, simple-minded English girl" (1:209), Vincent's sister Susan is the typical melodramatic figure of "virtue as innocence," living with her mother in a rural setting (corresponding to the typical enclosed garden). This is a most unsensational realm, a "pure, full daylight atmosphere, [a] humble virtuous world," where there are "no mysteries" (1:151-52). Whereas the sensationalists located disruption in the woman, the home and the family, Oliphant resurrects the villain as a male intruder, "a stranger who had crept into the house" (1:80-81). Colonel Mildmay intrudes into the "space of innocence" under the guise of courtship. He returns in the midst of Susan's wedding preparations (the "interruption of the fete") and takes Susan and Alice Mildmay with him under false pretences. A "'sort of grown-up baby'" (1:245), Alice is the child as innocence, who commonly supports the melodramatic heroine. There is "a period of nightmare in which innocence cannot speak its name," when Vincent and the reader, on the thwarted "labyrinthine" quest for "the lost creature" (1:349), are "paralyzed spectators of all possible threats to the self." "Identity [is] put into question through deceiving signs" and Vincent loses faith in Susan: reading her as a "sullied lily" and believing that "never henceforward could hope or honour blossom about his sister's name" (1:329). In the "period of nightmare" "Life [is] all disordered, incoherent, desperate" (1:354), "all landmarks were overturned, and only evil seemed to prosper" (2:102). Returning to her mother and brother Susan falls into delirium and then paralysis; under suspicion of murder (the shooting of Colonel Mildmay provides melodrama's ritual violence) and the loss of her virginity, she is "Virtue, expulsed, eclipsed, apparently fallen, [who] cannot effectively articulate the cause of the right." Silence is also imposed by her

⁴⁹ Brooks, "Structures of the Manichaeon" 28-36. Unattributed quotations in this paragraph are from Brooks 31-34, *passim*.

family, who cannot risk her "name." Her full recovery is dependent on the "recognition of error by those set in the position of judges," that is, her brother and society, and the necessary public recognition of her virtue is conveyed in the newspapers. Mrs Vincent, meanwhile, has refused to misread the signs of virtue and "patiently guides it to rehabilitation." Under the auspices of the mother, the "supreme protector" (2:286), and Alice Mildmay, "Susan's soul awoke" (2:270).

Susan's unsullied virtue is the most significant rejection of female sensationalism of the "fleshly" school, and a rejection of its norms. Susan is an anti-heroine; she does not transgress. She has not killed anyone, she has not "fallen": "[...] Susan was spotless—without blood on her hand, or speck upon her good fame. The lesser and the greater guilt were both cleared [...]" (2:142).⁵⁰ *Salem Chapel* can be read as "the struggle toward recognition of the sign of virtue and innocence"⁵¹ in the face of the Sensationalists, a struggle as much to establish "the fair Saxon girl" outside the text—that is, the reader—as pure, to bring about the triumph of the pure over the "improper" feminine. As well as the return to classic melodrama Oliphant also enlists parody in her attack on the Sensationalists. If "Braddon's villain is Wilkie Collins' victim"⁵² she is, in the figure of Lady Western, Oliphant's well-meaning but superficial self-confessed fool whose sexuality is destructive only insofar as she is misread by the desires of others (e.g. 1:112-13, 2:98-99). Sensationalism's predatory heroine is satirised mercilessly. While Salem's jealous mothers see "designing women" everywhere (e.g. 1:202, 270, and 2:307), the text's only true example is pink Phoebe Tozer whose "designs" are ludicrously transparent, the product of being "'a great deal too feelin'" (1:64). The "fleshly" pre-Raphaelite secret portrait of Lady Audley is transposed by Oliphant into Phoebe's only too public pink flesh on the one hand, and

⁵⁰ At this early stage in the history of female sensationalism the two most prominent heroines are Braddon's murderous and bigamous Lady Audley and the adulterous Lady Isabel Carlyle (in Wood's *East Lynne* 1861).

⁵¹ Brooks 28.

⁵² Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, new rev. ed. (London: Virago, 1982) 166.

the pure classical form of Susan on the other: "a figure dilated and grandiose—like a statue stricken into marble, raised to grandeur" (2:50), a figure of virtue tested and finally triumphant.⁵³

Mrs Hilyard/Mrs Mildmay is *Salem's* most obvious version of the sensational heroine, complete with disguised identity, a secret past, and the desire to murder her husband. Clearly Oliphant drew on *East Lynne* in her tale of the mother parted from her child who does not know her. Unlike Isabel Vane, however, Mrs Hilyard's separation from her husband is motivated by maternal not sexual passions, as is her (failed) attempt at murder. The images linking her with sexual predation and prostitution are, as in the case of Lady Western, misreadings.⁵⁴ In other respects, however, Mrs Hilyard is, as she says, "an equivocal female figure" (1:139). The sister-in-law of Lady Western—"belong[ing] to the Church [...] by rights" (1:32)—is also the Chapel-going inhabitant of a "mean little house" in Back Grove Street who works "men's clothing of the coarsest kind" (1:29,30), thus incorporating the two Carlingford communities delineated in the social and religious topographical opening to the novel. Carlingford is divided according to class and sectarian allegiance; "Trade" and "Society," "the humble Dissenting community" of Salem and "high life" of St. Roque's, form subcultures maintaining their own conventions and decorum:

"Chapel business," [is] mightily like [...] Church business. To name the two communities, however, in the same breath, would have been accounted little short of sacrilege in Carlingford. [...] as a general rule, the congregation of

⁵³ *East Lynne* and *The Woman in White* are both often noted as sources for *Salem Chapel*. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* was serialised from July to September 1861 and January to December 1862, and was published in 3 volumes on 1 October 1862. *Salem* was serialised in *Blackwood's* from February 1862 to January 1863.

⁵⁴ Mrs Pigeon speaking of Lady Western: "Painted ladies, that come out of a night with low necks and flowers in their hair [...] ain't fit company for a good pastor. *Them's* not the lambs of the flock [...]" (1:133, *italics original*). Mrs Hilyard, meeting Vincent in the dark street, deserted except for a policeman, calls herself "an equivocal female figure" (1:139). She also establishes her "purity" in this scene.

Salem kept by itself [...] knowing and keeping "its own place" in a manner edifying to behold. (1:3-4)

As the "two communities" in the same body, then, Mrs Hilyard both violates this decorum and figures the non-sectarian. In terms of Salem's poetics Mrs Hilyard's position as "an authority" on decorum (1:148) coupled with her "hearty perception of the ludicrous" (1:88) also situates her as an "equivocal person": an ironic persona and a "designing woman" who interprets and plays (both in the dramatic and literary senses) with the conventions of *Salem's* high/low typography, voicing its satiric possibilities. These, of course, include the Sensational. It is Mrs Hilyard who "in the same breath" chides Vincent for "talking romance and nonsense" (1:140) and introduces the melodramatic into the text:

"In such a dark night as this [...] I always think of something uncomfortable happening. [...] I think of women wandering along dismal solitary roads with babies in their arms—and of dreadful messengers of evil approaching unconscious houses, and looking in at peaceful windows upon the comfort they are about to destroy; and I think [...] of evil creatures pondering in the dark vile schemes against the innocent—" (1:143-44)

In this first part of *Salem*, the prelude to the melodrama, Mrs Hilyard is offered to Vincent and the reader as the "body of knowledge," a potential guide through the coming labyrinth. This is a tragi-comic body incorporating both low and high, incorporating the novel's social, religious and literary decorums into "a full gaze of the profoundest tragic sadness, on the surface of which a certain gleam of amusement seemed to hover" (1:34). Mrs Hilyard's is a body of knowledge drawn from experience not education (1:29-30); a body of "feelings which were totally undecipherable to Vincent," an earnest and inexperienced intellectual who cannot "see the serio-comic lights in which the whole business abounded" (1:131). But with the

entry into melodrama the "mysterious" Mrs Hilyard (1:36) is immediately revealed as the Sensational body; her "feelings" are those censured by the *Christian Remembrancer*, expressive of the "lowest extremities of existence." In the "spectacle of passionate life" Mrs Hilyard stands "up like a wild creature to defend her offspring" (1:180). The sensational body of knowledge then, is revealed as a body of passions that compete with Truth: "wild figures that filled the world, leaving small space for the calm suggestions of thought, and even to truth itself so little vantage ground" (1:180).

Unlike the *Christian Remembrancer*, however, Oliphant does not offer "the empire of reason" as an alternative to the "feelings"; it too is subjected to bathos. Vincent's attempt to rise to the Sensationalist's challenge is a failure, his inability to read the signs and access knowledge a parody of the Sensation hero Robert Audley's successful detection and containment of the threat to the patriarchal family.⁵⁵ Although the heroically named Arthur Vincent wishes "to dart forth, breathing fire and flame [...] upon the serpent who had entered his Eden" (1:255), far from protecting Susan it is his ill-chosen words that bring her into danger (1:297), and on the night of the "murder," the climax of the threat to his sister's virtue, the man of the family is fast asleep. Susan is, in fact, saved by women; Tozer the Buttermen and Vincent's mother fight his battles for him (e.g. ch. 36; 2:38-41); and Vincent is eventually incorporated into a matriarchal family.

Oliphant's critique is again intensified and broadened beyond the "specifically" Sensational by extending the mock-heroic to Vincent's "high vocation as a soldier of the Cross" (1:26), linking Vincent's clerical quest for "a spot of standing-ground, and an opportunity of making the Truth—and himself—known" (1:7) with his quest for Susan. The priest is, of course, the interpreter of ultimate Truth—the Word of God. Vincent, however, pays little attention to the word of God but a good deal to the words of men. He has come to Salem "if not with too much gospel, yet with an intellectual Christian mission, an evangelist of refined Nonconformity, an apostle of thought and

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Another target is Wilkie Collins's Walter Hartright in *The Woman in White* 1860.

religious opinion" (1:74). The young minister is, in fact, as much an Innocent as Susan and, in addition, "thinks too much [...] of pleasing the carnal mind" (2:35). His social and sexual inexperience (exemplified in his love for Lady Western) is accompanied by intellectual naïvety, an over-elevated understanding of the power of words and "the supremacy of thought" (1:180), Vincent being "in that stage of life when people imagine that you have only to state the truth clearly to have it believed, and that to convince a man of what is right is all that is necessary to his immediate reformation" (1:125). Vincent, however, does not see that his "lofty reasoning" (1:180) is informed by baser motives. In his famed lectures on Church and State, the "young Nonconformist mounted his *cheval de bataille*, and broke his impetuous spear against the Church" (1:122-23) but

he did not know any more than his audience that he never would have wielded them [his weapons] so heartily—perhaps would scarcely have taken them off the wall—but for the sudden sting with which his own inferior place, and the existence of a privileged class doubly shut against his entrance, had quickened his personal consciousness. (1:121)

Vincent's is the Romantic quest for Truth but this is romance in the real world, Romance within Realism. "Words the symbols of life" (1:77) are immersed in the market-place and the seeker for "providential decorum"—"the true enduring order of things"⁵⁶—is constrained by other decorums, those of the social, "literary" and religious economies. Vincent's quest for Susan and for his "spot of standing-ground, and an opportunity of making the Truth [...] known" is a literary quest; Vincent must learn how to *read* in order to understand decorum and "words the symbols of life." The young minister must learn how to read the "incomprehensible link" (1:138)

⁵⁶ Thomas Vargish, *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1985) 25-26.

between Realism and Romance, how to disentangle the sensational from the melodramatic, in order to access the true body of knowledge.

As Mrs Hilyard reminds him in the context of social decorum, Vincent is "a Paladin in some things, though in others only a Dissenting minister" (1:148). Cast in the Spenserian mold, a Romance hero who fails to understand its conventions, Vincent is continually deceived by appearances. His misreading of Susan as the Fallen Woman is equalled by his misinterpretation of Lady Western and her relation to him: "dreams as wild as any Arabian tale. [...] Beauty and Love, perennial hero and heroine of the romance that never ends" (1:94). His desires mix him a "Circe's cup," continually turning him from the path of clerical and family duty into the Grange Lane "Bower of Bliss, the fool's paradise of his youth" (1:109). Vincent believes that with Lady Western he is rescued from the bathos of Salem Chapel:

to sink suddenly into "coorses" of sermons and statistics of seat-letting in Salem—into tea-parties of deacons' wives, and singing-classes—into the complacent society of those good people who were conscious of doing so much for the chapel and supporting the minister—that was a downfall not to be lightly thought of. Salem itself, and the new pulpit, which had a short time ago represented to poor Vincent that tribune from which he was to influence the world, that point of vantage which was all a true man needed for the making of his career, dwindled into a miserable scene of trade before his disenchanted eyes—a preaching shop, where his success was to be measured by seat-letting, and his soul decanted out into periodical issue under the seal of Tozer & Co. (1:74)

With "Her" he is "raised high on the sunshiny heights, where love and beauty had their perennial abode. [...] By her side he forgot all social distinctions [...]. It was a poetic triumph amid the prose tumults and downfalls of life" (1:231). While the odours of bacon and cheese help the uncomfortably genteel Vincent to identify and avoid (if not

worst) the "artlessness" of Phoebe, he fails to read the ways in which the "soft perfumy presence" (2:178) of Lady Western and the "poetic" are equally immersed in the market-place.⁵⁷ Vincent's quixotic jousting against the Church that drives Rose Lake, the drawing-master's daughter, to throw in her confirmation and cross the road so "that she might not pass Masters's, that emporium of evil" (1:124) is patronised by Lady Western "simply as [...] a 'distraction'" and "'a charming evening'" (1:128-29). In Masters's Bookshop itself "the Anglican lyre" (1:98) suffers much the same fate as Vincent's soul in his "masters[']s" "preaching shop," the "much-multiplied volume" (1:96) of Keble's *The Christian Year* reduced to a class accessory, a variously packaged commodity enabling such as Lady Western to further exercise their patronage. The Bookshop is also a part of Vanity Fair.

As is the literary marketplace more generally. While Vincent's Romantic constructions are misguided it is his exploitation of the Sensational at the Salem tea-meeting where he most seriously violates decorum and departs from his "Master's Work" (1:79).⁵⁸ Enlarging upon "Mrs Hilyard's idea of the sentiment of 'such a night,'" Vincent weaves a narrative of affect "having no connection whatever with the 'object,' the place, or the listeners." Then perceiving "the effect of his eloquence"—"the faces grew pale and the eyes bright, [...] shivers of restrained emotion ran through the astonished audience. [...] If they had been witnessing a melodrama, they scarcely could have been more excited"—"he awoke [...] to feel how unreal was the sentiment in his own breast which had produced this genuine feeling in others, and with a sudden amusement proceeded to deepen his colours and make bolder strokes of effect." Vincent's literary "'humbug,'" his sensational writing of the body through the

⁵⁷ Peter Brooker, Paul Stigant and Peter Widdowson make the opposite mistake, limiting their identification of the "real" world to the aristocracy, an identification achieved, they allege, by Oliphant's deployment of Romantic and Melodramatic conventions. See "History and 'literary value': *Adam Bede* and *Salem Chapel*," *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History*, ed. Peter Humm, Paul Stigant and Peter Widdowson, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1986) 84 ff.

⁵⁸ Oliphant has here anticipated Henry Mansel (later Dean of St. Pauls) who wrote that Sensation novels usurp "a portion of the preacher's office [...] moulding the minds and forming the habits and tastes of its generation" by "preaching to the nerves." See Mansel, "Sensation Novels," *Quarterly Review* 113 (Apr. 1863): 482.

evocation of "the dark unknown existence [...] the dark night," is directly juxtaposed with the real threat to Susan's body and the "pure, full daylight atmosphere"—the beginnings of the melodramatic episode (1:160-62).

The entry into the melodramatic—where the threat to decorum is embodied by Susan—is the entry into a debate between the Sensationalist's version of the world on the one hand, a world interpreted by men, and where (says Mrs Hilyard) God "stands by like a man, and sees them [the Innocents] murdered, and shines and rains all the same. [...] He never interferes" (1:303), and the "humble virtuous world" of "the woman's letter" (1:152, 151) as articulated by Mrs Vincent on the other, where "God does not always save the Innocents, as you say—but He knows why, though we don't" (Matt. 2:16; 1:306). Vincent, as a man "who thinks too much of the carnal mind," who desires to ascertain "the purpose of [...] Providence" (1:189), is unable to accept the paradox of his mother's faith in human ignorance. Following the Sensationalist's body of knowledge, however, leads to doubt:

"Saving souls!" what did it mean? [...] He forgot the bounds of orthodox speculation [...]. He set forth the dark secrets of life with exaggerated touches [...]. He painted out of his own aching fancy a soul innocent, yet stained with the heaviest of mortal crimes [...] which was the criminal? which was the innocent? A wild confusion of sin and sorrow, of dreadful human complications, misconceptions, [...]. Could words help it [...]? (2:115-16)

Alive to the threat to Susan, Vincent's "sentiments" are now genuine, unlike those exploited at the tea-meeting. The minister is still utilising the rubric of Sensationalism, however; his "exaggerated touches" continue to obscure truth, producing such affect that "the people were almost too much excited to perceive the plain meaning of his words, if any plain meaning had ever been in that passionate outcry of a wounded and bewildered soul" (2:118). In this world, melodrama's "period of nightmare," Susan is the key to signification, the true body of knowledge, and her body *cannot* be read

according to Sensationalism. Her nervous trauma is *not* a sign of sin, as both the clergyman and the doctor, misled by her delirious "text," initially read it. The truth of Susan, in fact, lies beyond words, and in what Brooks calls a "text of muteness," her silent body.⁵⁹ This is a body of decorum, a paradigm of order, but it is only after Susan's innocence has been established that the Doctor can read her as such: as one of those with "pure blood," with "natures delicately organised, but in such exquisite adjustment" (2:155). The "straight-forward, simple-minded English girl" is "safe in her own pure sense of right" (1:209); as *Salem's* other clerical wife notes, "Young girls in health don't take infection" (2:19).⁶⁰

Mrs Vincent's "simple" readings of Providence are often queried by other characters and parodied by the text but ultimately her faith is vindicated.⁶¹ Susan's body, correctly read, is a providential proof-text, an embodied theology: "her own child, who had overcome evil. [...] It was at once a vindication of the hard 'dealings' of Providence, and of that strength of innocence and purity, in which the little woman believed with all her heart" (2:292-93). Unlike the Sensational Rachel Mildmay, who "weep[s] for her children and will not be comforted" (Matthew 2:18), Mrs Vincent, in her time of trial, "did not rebel, but her heart lifted up a bitter cry to the Father in heaven" (2:264). God is approached not through the Sensational "feelings," or Reason,⁶² but through the "heart": "an inarticulate agony of prayer, which doubtless God deciphered, though it never came to words" (2:5, see also 2:57). Mrs Vincent knows that "'Words will do no good'" (1:299).

⁵⁹ See Brooks ch. 3: "The Text of Muteness." Brooks identifies the "remarkably prevalent" use of the mute in melodrama as signifying the "effort to recover for meaning what appeared to be in danger of being lost to meaning" through "the language of presence" (56, 78, 79).

⁶⁰ Sensation novels were often reviewed using images of disease. Mansel, for example, wrote that Sensation novels cater to "the cravings of a diseased appetite," and themselves "foster the disease and [...] stimulate the want which they supply" (483). See also Pykett 51.

⁶¹ For example, in chapter 16, when Vincent and his mother go to Lonsdale to save Susan, who has in fact already left with Col. Mildmay. Mrs Vincent frequently and inappropriately thanks Providence, and refusing to believe that Susan isn't in the empty house says: "It is God that keeps her asleep to keep her happy" (1:291). Of course, this turns out to be in some sense true in the end.

⁶² Mrs. Vincent's "simple" faith saves her from doubt (e.g. 2:12-13), and gives her greater knowledge of God than her son, the minister (2:116-17).

With the "recognition of the sign of virtue and innocence" which is also the sign of faith, Susan as "Una" (2:292) displaces Mrs Hilyard as the non-sectarian body. This is the pure maternal body, the decorous body shared with Mrs Vincent (as the Doctor notes, 2:155)—"a wholesome, daylight woman, in [whom is] no strain of superlative emotions" (2:24). The non-sensational feminine body incorporates the Sensationalist's "poor child of passion and sorrow" (2:292), taking her out of the market-place⁶³ and into the "humble, virtuous world."

This is the world of the everyday, the domestic, non-institutional world. It is a feminine world of light that men find "incomprehensible," encapsulated in Vincent's repeated debates with his mother over the smoking lamp, his "impatient wonder, half contemptuous of that strange female development which amid all troubles could carry through, from one crisis of life to another, that miraculous trifling, and concern itself about the smoking of a lamp." It is Mrs Vincent with her assertion that "it is often the trifles that are the most important" (2:196) who is, of course, closest to the kingdom of heaven (see the parable of the wise and foolish virgins [Matt 25: 1-13]). Again, Vincent's inability to read the feminine body of knowledge, his impatience "for what he considered the mean details of existence" (1:156), excludes him from Truth:

Woman's weaker nature, that could mingle the common with the great; or woman's strength, that could endure all things—which was it? The young man [...] could no more understand these phenomena of love and woe, than he could translate the distant mysteries of the spheres. (1:299)

Sitting in front of "his mother's lamp" following Susan's recovery he finally learns to speak "from the heart" (2:332) and is "Perhaps [...] less sure than [he] was at first [...] that the voice of the people is the voice of God" (2:341). Despite his eventual decision to leave Salem, to serve God not mammon (2:341), Vincent is still in "fetters"

⁶³ Colonel Mildmay originally intends to go to law so he can reclaim his daughter as his rightful property (1:165), "and sell her somehow, either to be married, or worse" (2:36).

to the market-place. While Susan's recovery has banished the "dark fiction of despair" (2:158), Vincent's final realisation that his Romance with Lady Western was "words [that] mean nothing at all" (2:318) and his consequent espousal of Realism—the "neutral-coloured" life (2:349) symbolised by "the pale woman," Adelaide Tufton (2:326), where Romance is eschewed⁶⁴—has also banished the necessary "fictions" of faith:

"Love one another!" [...] he is not sure what that means, though he is a minister [...] he is not very sure what anything means [...] he only faintly guesses how God, being pitiful, had the heart to make man and leave him on this sad earth [...] "not in the world, not in the church, nowhere on earth can we be unanimous except by moments." (2:338-39)

Love under the rubric of Realism is no more than a euphemism for the sexual, patriarchal market-place, the possession by men of wives and children (2:339).

Vincent "went into literature, as was natural" (2:348) but it is only in his mother's house, beyond the market-place—literary, religious and sexual—that his quest for "words the symbols of life" and "a romance of real life" (2:94) can be fulfilled. It is Susan's classical body—"that grand figure, large and calm and noble like a Roman woman" (2:349) with its "air of quiet command and power" (2:350)—that the text offers as the answer to Vincent's desire for a "Church of the Future—an ideal corporation, grand and primitive" (2:348). Vincent finds in the household of mother and daughters the "unanimity" he seeks. The non-sectarian is not "equivocal" but "perpetual sweet accord, with sweeter jars of difference" (2:353). Decorum reigns: words and bodies are as one, the two girls "talking in a kind of dual, harmonious movement of sound" (2:352).

⁶⁴ Adelaide is "not a girl to be frightened for words" (2:36) and tells Vincent that "If I were a clever romancer like some people, I could have made it all perfect for you, but I prefer the truth" (1:45). Adelaide, however, is "separated from life" (1:39).

Salem wrests Romance from the Sensational, resurrecting the "proper" feminine, reestablishing Decorum. It is somewhat ironic, then, that Oliphant's text is generally read as a fall from decorum, an "equivocal" text. Oliphant, as I hope is now obvious, could not escape Realistic criticism by arguing, as Hawthorne did, for the distinction between realism and romance.⁶⁵ Her text is self-designedly "dual," attempting to show that romance lies within realism, and that the quest for truth leads us back to domestic "trifles," to Brooks's "sublimity of the everyday."

3. Conclusion: Non-sectarian Variations

Oliphant's and Craik's texts share the broad outline of their non-sectarian visions—anti-institutional, anti-doctrinal and (in the case of Oliphant, overtly) anti-intellectual—with a number of mid-century initiatives. Their stress on the shift from Mosaic law and a God of retribution to a New Testament theology of mercy and love, and their emphasis on lived theology and experience are familiar from the thought of Maurice, for example (see above, 14-15). Like other mid-century thinkers, both explore the notion of the Christian gentleman as simultaneously classless, non-sectarian, and theologically "enlightened."⁶⁶

Theirs is a "feminized" non-sectarianism, however. Both authors gender the shift from Old Testament to Christian theology by incorporating a critique of contemporary gender relations, aligning the law of the Fathers with the legal treatment of wives and mothers, and opposing it to the domestic ideal, the loving realm of the mother. Rather than being strictly anti-institutional, both texts offer the private feminine institution—the home—as the "Church of the Future." While the matter of class is integral to the analyses of both texts, gender, particularly in Oliphant, is

⁶⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, preface, *The House of Seven Gables*, ed. Seymour L. Gross, Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1967) 1-3.

⁶⁶ Dr Arnold's aphorism—"A thorough English gentleman—Christian, manly, and enlightened"—was popularised through Dean Stanley's *Life* of 1844, and, as Gilmour writes, was guaranteed to appeal to a new generation hoping to avoid sectarian divisions and theological and social conservatism. See Gilmour 84.

fundamental. In both texts the male ideal of the gentleman is accompanied, or even usurped, by the maternal ideal. Maurice's "commonest practical life" is found in the domain of women.

Both authors are thus involved with the "clarification of the cosmic moral sense of everyday gestures" which according to Brooks is the function of melodrama, the pre-eminent genre of the post-sacred era. In both authors melodrama becomes a crucial element in their arguments with secularity. For Craik it signifies the secular godless world, the tragi-comic body of the improper woman which can and must be reincorporated into the Christian body through the agency of the mother. Oliphant affirms the validity of melodrama in a world where significance is unclear, but she rejects its transmutation into Sensationalism and the consequent loss of the truth of the pure maternal body and thus the Divine. *Salem's* tragi-comic body, Mrs Hilyard, also figures the sensational, and thus is finally displaced by the classical body of Innocence,⁶⁷ a body whose truth is beyond the literary market-place, whose "honour is not her word" (2:253). Craik's "Poor Caroline" becomes "poor Susan" who, with the resurrection of the feminine soul into the "humble, virtuous world," is not "poor Susan now" (2:351).

Both works demonstrate a suspicion of human texts, speech and "writing." But for Craik the melodramatic problem of perverted meaning can be solved by a simple appeal to the Mastertext and an elevation of non-verbal forms of expression. Problems raised by this stress on the physical—for instance desire—will only occur if the text and body are not in harmony. Although *Salem* also demonstrates "a 'return' to the language of presence"⁶⁸ with Susan's silent body, for Oliphant the correlation of bodies and texts is more complex. Meaning is not so easily accessed and while human words are not capable of accessing God, we cannot escape them.

⁶⁷ Although Mrs Vincent, like Ursula March, offers to incorporate the "improper" feminine (1:305-06), and eventually rescues Mrs Hilyard from the vengeful "justice" of Vincent (ch. 39), "escape" is impossible (2:188 and 300). Unlike Craik's Caroline, Mrs Hilyard remains trapped within the melodramatic—"so many wretched masquers playing a rude game among the dreadful wastes of life" (2:234); at the close of the text she is still "a wandering restless soul" (2:353).

⁶⁸ Brooks 79.

As Sensationalism problematized the Domestic novel, and Oliphant problematizes Sensationalism, she also problematizes Craik. Sensationalism focussed the issue of literature's involvement in the market-place and what Ann Cvetkovich has called the "politics of affect."⁶⁹ Whereas Craik accepts literary affect as part of the "providential aesthetic," manipulating the emotions of her audience to convey her "providential decorum" (which itself stresses the importance of affect),⁷⁰ Oliphant investigates the aesthetic itself, questioning the propriety of affect in particular. *Salem* locates and problematizes the relationships between literature, "feeling" and providence; between bodies, words in the market-place and the Word; between the body and the text. Thus while Craik's text is a "gospel," Oliphant's is a more speculative theology, ultimately open-ended: we can trust, but we cannot know God.

Both texts demonstrate a slippage between the human and divine. In *John Halifax* this occurs between the human father and the Father in heaven. In *Salem* the Father remains "One half-known, half-identified" (2:116) and the pure mother rivals God as the "supreme protector." Whereas Ursula's "crowning consecration" is to sacrifice her child to the Father, Mrs Vincent fights to save her child, and not as a "wild animal" but as a Christian. Although Craik's *Arcadia* is the type of heaven on earth, for maternal affect to break through the logic of history and the law of the Fathers involves its removal into "some new sphere," and the new Adam and Eve are both finally situated beyond the text. For Oliphant resurrection occurs within the text and into the maternal home. For Craik "whither we go we know, and the Way we know," for Oliphant all we know is that God knows and this theology, embodied in the pure maternal, leads us back to the lamp in the parlour. The mystery of mysteries does not lie in the "hectic rebellion against nature" but in "a straight-forward, simple-minded English girl."

⁶⁹ Cvetkovich 2 and passim.

⁷⁰ Thomas Vargish explains his term "Providential aesthetic" as "those devices or conventions characteristic of literary works in which the assumption of providential design and intention at work in the fictional world is a major premise or concern." "Providential Decorum" is "a cumulative organization of values and assumptions about the world and the efficacy of human action in it," a "paradigm of relationships, a sense of the true underlying order of things, a center of value in the narrative." See Vargish 6-7 and 24.

Chapter Three. Experimental Narratives and Writing Presence: Gender and Atonement. *A Life for a Life* (1859) and *A Beleaguered City* (1880)

This chapter focusses on the relationship between contemporary theological and gender discourses as expressed in Craik's mid-century domestic novel *A Life for a Life* (1859) and Oliphant's late Victorian fantasy novella *A Beleaguered City* (1880). In both cases these are experimental texts located at crucial points in the history of the "crisis of faith," their non-traditional narratologies, both of which translate private into public discourse, developed in order to deal with contemporary hermeneutical and representational crises. My readings concentrate specifically on representations of the Atonement, a theological narrative that focusses on the nature of the relationship between the body and the text, and that was central to nineteenth-century religious change. A contested narrative, its promotion of sacrifice as crucial to the achievement of unity had obvious parallels with the contemporaneous "Woman Question" and issues surrounding female self-sacrifice and marriage.

1. *A Life for a Life* (1859): The "great question of our time" and the "living sacrifice"

Physician, heal thyself. (Luke 4:23)

But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Matthew 9:12-13)

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. (Romans 12:1)

Herein the patient must minister to herself. (Dinah Mulock Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts about Women* [1858] 69)¹

Christianity alone raised the woman to her rightful and original place, as man's one help-meet, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh [...]. (ibid 159)

[I affirm] the doctrine—of which, until [the New Testament], there was no trace; either in external or revealed religion—that for every crime, being repented of and forsaken, there is forgiveness with Heaven; and if with Heaven, there ought to be with men. This without entering at all into the doctrinal question of atonement, but simply taking the basis of Christian morality, as contrasted with the natural morality of the savage, or even of the ancient Jew, which without equivalent retribution pre-supposes no such thing as pardon. (ibid 195-96)

Craik's 1859 story features "a man-slayer [...] finally [...] loved by and married to his victim's own sister"² and a seducer finally loved by and married to the mother of his child. As the title *A Life for a Life* further suggests, the novel is located simultaneously in mid-century debates over capital punishment, "fallen women" and the broader woman question, and theological debate over the nature of the Atonement. The novel privileges gendered subjectivities both narratologically and thematically.³ With its innovative dual narration—the alternating "Her Story" and "His Story"—and its configuration of marriage as Atonement, *A Life for a Life* appears to formally embody the binary logic based on sexual difference that was fundamental to nineteenth-century culture. Moreover, the thematic resolution offered by the marriage plot and

¹ Craik and Christina Rossetti, *Maude; On Sisterhoods; A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Pickering, 1993).

² Craik, preface, *A Life for a Life* (London: Hurst and Blackett, n.d.) iv. Further references, by page and chapter, will occur in the text.

³ That the novel "never gets out of the introspective process" and into "the fresh, open air of real life" was noted with interested disapproval in a contemporary review. See Rev. of *A Life*, by Dinah Mulock Craik, *The Athenæum* 1658 (6 Aug. 1859): 173.

narratological resolution into the feminine voice (the text closes with "Her Story")⁴ provide another archetypal instance of the Armstrong thesis: the resolution of all difference into gender difference, the agent of resolution desire, the *deus ex machina* the female writer. While this section will investigate how Craik reconciles the sexual and religious economies through the use of the prototypical "domestic" plot of love and marriage, exploring her concept of "a life for a life" in both the marital and theological senses, this exploration will seek to avoid the exclusivity and secularity engendered by the Armstrong trajectory. It is too easy, for example, for such a critical approach to produce a reading limited by its teleology, a reading in which all difference exists as a "proto-constituent" of sexual discourse, and is therefore effectively dissolved prior to any textual resolution. Craik's treatment of "sacrifice," central to the reconsideration of both the sexual and religious "economies," demonstrates the restrictiveness of such a reading. Sacrifice is the theological meeting-place of the sacred and the secular and a crucial constituent of the feminine in mid-century gender ideology. The mystery at the heart of *A Life for a Life*, however, is not a female but a *male* body; and the significance of this body, the complex of sacrifice/punishment, transgression, repentance and salvation which it figures, while linked symbolically to the Woman Question, is also connected more directly to penal reform. Similarly, "the Penitentiary question with all its poisonous and insidious ramifications"⁵ appears in Craik's novel as much an intertext of the discourse of penal reform as of sexual discourse. That the text is ultimately resolved into the feminine voice does not mean that the central enigmatic body simply prefigures the feminine; it signifies the transgressive body, both male and female.

Craik, then, claims attention for discourses other than the sexual, and while marriage functions as a symbol of Atonement, Atonement remains more than a symbol of marriage. The text, that is, despite its privileging of gendered subjectivities,

⁴ J. Russell Perkin believes this feminization cost her literary status. See "Narrative Voice and the 'Feminine' Novelist: Dinah Mulock and George Eliot," *Victorian Review* 18 (Summer 1992): 34.

⁵ [S. J. Howson] *Quarterly Review* 108 (1860): 351. Howson, later Dean of Chester, is talking about institutions for prostitutes.

promotes an epistemology that is essentially theological rather than psychological. *A Life* is a participant in English theological debate of the 1850s, documenting the shift in sensibility from the economic and forensic frame of reference that dominated Evangelical ideology of the first half of the nineteenth century.⁶ *A Life for a Life* answers "the great question of our time" (155, ch. 16)—the relationship between transgression and the social body—by transforming the blood sacrifice into the "living sacrifice" of Romans 12:1. Craik's text is thus not only part of the change in understanding of the Atonement in particular but also part of the broader theological shift from atonement- to incarnation-based theology.⁷ Craik's delineation of the "living sacrifice," the modern religious subject, involves the interweaving of contemporary social and theological discourses, making *A Life* a perfect text to explore further Garrett Stewart's notion of the problematic "gap" between social and literary studies on the one hand, and social practices and cultural "mastertexts" on the other (see above, introduction 22).

⁶ In the 1850s liberal theologians such as Jowett and Maurice rejected both eternal punishment and the idea of a vicarious bloody sacrifice inflicted upon Christ by his loving Father, the idea that Christ was thus paying the debts of humanity in suffering for their sins. Moral sensibility, the realisation that sacrifice was not unique to Christianity, and Biblical criticism all contributed to the rejection of the substitutionary atonement. See Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 282-83.

⁷ Storr traces "a growing displacement from its central position of the doctrine of the Atonement by that of the Incarnation." See Vernon F. Storr, *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century, 1800-1860* (London: Longmans, 1913) 6. The extent of this "displacement" can be seen in the Anglo-Catholic *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation* 1889, where, following the Greek Fathers, instead of the Incarnation being regarded as a

mere afterthought, made necessary by man's failure, [...] it [was seen as having] been part of the divine plan from the beginning, and was, indeed, the natural sequel to the creation of man. Man had been made in the divine image, and the Logos, or Word of God, had been continually active in the world, preparing the way for the supreme revelation of Himself in a historical person. Thus the Incarnation, as the crown of a long process and not as the remedy for a catastrophe, could itself be regarded as the Atonement, the bringing together of God and man. The death of Jesus was not to be isolated from the life of Jesus, for that life, whatever else it did, had taught men "that in the conditions of the highest human life we have access as nowhere else, to the inmost nature of the Divine." (L. E. Elliott-Binns, *English Thought 1860-1900: The Theological Aspect* [London: Longmans, 1956] 244 [Elliott-Binns is quoting Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of God in Recent Theology* 157])

Craik opens her "domestic novel with [...] revolutionary undertones"⁸ in 1856, the year of *John Halifax, Gentleman's* publication. *Halifax's* confident panoramic historical allegory, however, is distanced by the "vertiginous ideological rift" opened by the Crimean war.⁹ *Halifax's* bourgeois mythography opened in the aftermath of the French Revolution and concluded with the onset of the politically democratic era in the early 1830s (Abolition and the first Reform Bill); *A Life* opens in the immediate aftermath of the Crimean war and clearly locates itself in the "rift" opened by the democratisation of knowledge, within the "democratic" doublebind, the "crisis of faith generated by the unprecedented publicity that accompanied the Crimean war."¹⁰

What a time it was—this time two years ago! How the actual romance of each day, as set down in the newspapers, made my old romances read like mere balderdash: how the present, in its infinite piteousness, its tangible horror, and the awfulness of what they called its "glory," cast the tame past altogether into shade! Who read history then, or novels, or poetry? Who read anything but that fearful "Times?"

And now it is all gone by—we have peace again; and this 20th of September, 1856, I begin with my birthday a new journal [...]. (1-2, ch. 1)

It is not "all gone by," however; unlike *John Halifax's* sepulchral Mother Earth (see above ch. 2, 72) Craik's new text is itself a discursive battleground, into which the violence of individual and cultural history continually implodes in the form of diseased

⁸ Monica C. Fryckstedt, *Geraldine Jewsbury's Athenaeum Reviews: A Mirror of Mid-Victorian Attitudes to Fiction*, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, Studia anglistica Upsaliensia 61 (Uppsala [Sweden]: [Uppsala universitet], 1986) 70.

⁹ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989) 170.

¹⁰ Poovey, *Uneven Developments* 169. G. H. R. Tillotson notes that "newspapers played a more important role than ever in informing the public in Britain. After the Crimean War, the 'Mutiny' was the second major British conflict in which the war correspondent, the war artist and the photograph moulded public opinion." See Tillotson, "The Indian Picturesque: Images of India in British Landscape Painting, 1780-1880," *The Raj: India and the British 1600-1947*, gen. ed. C. A. Bayly (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1990) 246. For comments on the Indian Mutiny see below, n16.

and broken bodies. The crisis produced by representation produces its own representational crisis. While the sepulchral Mother Earth was written on by John Halifax, and the maternal body imposed by the Word, *A Life's* bodies/embodiments—whether real or "ghastly imaginations" (116, ch. 13)—disrupt the writing, breaking the surface of the text itself (e.g. 143, ch. 15), demanding to be read. Existing literary forms are entirely unable to deal with the "actual romance of each day" and Craik repudiates the traditional form of *John Halifax* for the overlapping diaries of Max Urquhart and Theodora Johns(t)on. While Dr Max Urquhart in his journal does write the body, his case notes are writing as/toward interpretation not as imposition. It is the journal, the private, subjective account that carries the symbolic weight of new life, picking up the torch lit by W. H. Russell and the other war correspondents.¹¹ By the novel's conclusion it is clear that the private, individual interpretations of the biblical images of atonement and the private domestic narrative itself—as expressed and embodied by Dora and Max—have effectively and affectively replaced public or institutional narratives. The modern "feeling" religious subject and its text are offered as an answer to the mid-century crisis of authority and representation. Craik is also aware, however, of the democratic doublebind, the burden of knowledge, making the issue of individual responsibility central to her text.¹²

Craik parallels the crisis of faith in military and political authority brought about by the war and the crisis of faith in theological discourse. In both cases the crisis is precipitated by the democratisation process (for the democratisation of theology, see

¹¹ Russell was not the only correspondent whose critical despatches galvanised public opinion. See Alan Palmer, *The Banner of Battle: The Story of the Crimean War* (New York: St. Martins, 1987). Russell was also present in India, and while "less critical of military failings than he had been during the Crimean War [...] his despatches carried the full horror of the war and its impact on British and Indian civilians quite impartially" (G. H. R. Tillotson, "The Indian Picturesque" 246).

¹² The potential for tragedy is signalled by Craik's use of the lovers in Schiller's historical tragedy *Wallenstein* (1798; trans. Coleridge 1800) which is set during the Thirty Years War, the seventeenth-century conflict between European Catholics and Protestants. See *A Life* 142-46. Schiller's Max and Thekla (daughter of the famous general, Wallenstein) are parted forever when, with Thekla's encouragement, Max holds true to his own convictions and declines to join Wallenstein's rebellion. Both lovers die; Wallenstein is murdered by his own officers who suspect him of betrayal. Craik presents the lovers' elevation of honour over personal desire as a model of "love, unselfish, faithful and true [...] a *right* love—[that] teaches people to think of the *right* first, and themselves afterwards [...]" (146, italics original).

above, introduction 11ff) and focusses on issues of representation and authority. The concepts of vicarious sacrifice and eternal punishment were under attack in the 1850s, the charges of cruelty and waste given some urgency by contemporary events. Craik was by no means the only one to consider the relationship between a supposedly Christian nation and its military exploits, a relationship highlighted by the ostensibly religious nature of the Crimean war.¹³ Nor was she the only one to attempt to read the resulting carnage according to the ultimate narrative of sacrifice: as a holocaust, a reading that would itself reflect back onto the Atonement narrative.¹⁴ In 1856, for example, Nightingale wrote (privately): "I stand at the altar of the murdered men, and while I live, I fight their cause."¹⁵ Craik similarly uses the typology/iconography of the sacrificial victim in order to criticise the Establishment. Indeed, in the first part of the novel the critical voice is largely that of actual public record both in its tone and targets—attacking military and governmental institutions and their culture, a culture Craik suggests is damagingly male and non-domestic (see ch. 11, esp. 101).

Craik stages the Crimea as totally male, presenting a sharp contrast with the female world of domesticity. Of course contemporary readers would have read Nightingale back into the text, and Craik herself writes Dr Max Urquhart as a kind of male Nightingale complete with lamp (127, ch. 14). (Although, importantly, the image of the lamp is also applied to Theodora [357, ch. 36].) Craik almost entirely elides another contemporary narrative of sacrifice and death, however, that provided by the Indian Mutiny (1857-59) with its female version of the Crimean carnage.¹⁶ This

¹³ The original quarrel was between France and Russia over the right to protect Christian holy sites.

¹⁴ Out of 94,000 men who left for the Crimea 16,300 fatalities were through disease and a further 13,000 were invalided, while 1,760 died from wounds and 2,660 were killed in action. Boyd Hilton's reading of the 1850s English debate over Atonement theology only notes in passing that "foreign affairs" were paramount in the 1855-56 period. Hilton himself, in keeping with his economic emphasis, stresses the limited liability legislation of the same period (297).

¹⁵ Quoted in Cecil Woodham-Smith, *Florence Nightingale: 1820-1910* (London: Constable, 1950) 259.

¹⁶ Despite my inability to access detailed biographical or bibliographical sources I am assuming that the writing of Craik's *A Life* would have been informed by the "Indian Mutiny." At least a year and a half had elapsed between news of the massacre at Cawnpore of over 200 British citizens, mainly women and children, news which had reached Britain by the autumn of 1857, and the publication of *A*

omission was perhaps partly due to fear of public opprobrium such as greeted Paton's *In Memoriam*.¹⁷ In itself, of course, the mid-century image of the female martyr was too polarized for Craik's purposes, inhabiting a simplistically dichotomous narrative in which Christian innocence opposed Heathen sin.¹⁸ Craik's active rejection of racial prejudice (noted by Cora Kaplan) also prevented her directly utilising these ready-made images of female martyrdom.¹⁹ The massacre at Cawnpore had elicited savage British reprisals, the morality of which went largely unquestioned except by such as John Stuart Mill, and, I would suggest, Craik (in her focus on the ethics of capital and corporal punishment). All these historical bodies are among those that disrupt Craik's text, demanding signification despite their absence from the text's surface.

As a cross-dressed Nightingale, Dr Urquhart's experiences and observations as an army surgeon in the Crimea result in his campaigning for Sanitary and Barracks

Life for a Life in 1859. The "Cawnpore" cartoons in *Punch* were running from August 1857 and newspapers, cheap pamphlets and prints published gory details of this and other outrages, and the British reprisals. *A Life for a Life* was reviewed by *The Athenæum* in August 1859; the novel is advertised as a new release in this number (1658, 6 Aug. 1859).

¹⁷ Craik admitted to sensitivity to public opinion. Reviewers criticised her for making the entire plot hinge on an accidental slaying. Introducing the revised or restored version, Craik readily admitted this had been a result of self-censorship: "when written down, the confession ['I *meant* to kill him'] seemed too dreadful: a weak fear arose, or was suggested to me, that 'the public would never bear it,' that is, having a murderer as the hero (iv, italics original).

Exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1858, *In Memoriam* by Sir Joseph Noel Paton R.S.A. proved highly controversial. Paton drew on Renaissance prototypes of Christian martyrdom scenes, representing the women as if in the moment before their death at the hands of Sepoys and incorporating the 23rd psalm on the work's frame. While "too revolting for further description" for one critic, another felt it was "almost a profanation to hang this picture in a show-room, it should have a chapel to itself" (Tillotson, "The Indian Picturesque" 241). Paton later altered the painting so that it illustrated the "Christian Heroism of the British Ladies in India during the Mutiny of 1857, and their ultimate deliverance by British prowess." See Susan Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1987) 65. Also exhibited in 1858, and unambiguously and immediately popular, was Henry Nelson O'Neill's *Eastward Ho! August 1857*, which depicted soldiers leaving their families at the dockside.

¹⁸ Paton's imagery also drew on mid-century literary depictions of the female Christian martyr, of which Margaret Maison notes that "so common did these 'thrillers' about Early Christian martyrs become that one critic referred to them as a 'literary nuisance'" (*Search Your Soul, Eustace: A Survey of the Religious Novel in the Victorian Age* [London: Stag-Sheed, 1961] 156).

¹⁹ Cora Kaplan, introduction, *Olive and The Half-Caste*, by Craik (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) ix-xxv, passim.

Another reason for Craik's omission of the Cawnpore martyr is suggested by Pamela Gerrish Nunn's claim that such images were a backlash against mid-century feminism. See "Broken Blossoms" in *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1995) 73-93.

Reform in the face of military indifference.²⁰ It is not the Horse Guards however, but a Church of England clergyman, Theodora's father, whom Craik represents as the Old Testament type of the Atonement—the father who would sacrifice his own son (74, ch. 7), who has in fact written his own son out of history: "blotted out—as if he never had existed" (139, ch. 15; 164, ch. 16; 251, ch. 26). To the Reverend Mr Johnston "the law of the land—[is] the law of God" and "God's law is blood for blood. *Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.*" To interpret the text otherwise is to "blaspheme" (164, ch. 16, italics original). In this combination of the "Mosaic" and "Calvinistic" (263, ch. 27), the Reverend Mr Johnston, politely described as "classical" (44, ch. 5), is a typical representative of his cloth, who are less politely described as "droning out 'words, words, words,' when bodies and souls perish in thousands round them," and "splitting theological hairs" (43, ch. 5).²¹ Craik further suggests the pre-Christian, "primitive" origins of blood-sacrifice by situating Harry Johnston's murder at Stonehenge and allying dogmatism with "the blind obstinacy of a brute" (123, ch. 14).

Craik complicates such dogmatism, whether of the Nightingale or clerical variety, by making her hero a murderer, one who (like the soldier) takes as well as saves lives and is himself cast as a martyr. Craik's is a profoundly Christian sensationalism,²² using paradox to unsettle and reveal the text's bourgeois secret as the

²⁰ See, for example, *A Life* 23, ch. 3; 88, ch. 8; 98-99, ch. 11 etc. Dr Urquhart, however, is a solitary reformer and lacks Nightingale's influence (160, ch. 16).

²¹ Dr Urquhart's criticism of the army chaplain again problematizes the relationship between Christianity and war:

He leaves us to fatten upon Hebrew roots, without throwing us a crumb of Christianity; prefers Moses and the prophets to the New Testament; no wonder, as some few doctrines there, "Do unto others as ye would they should do unto you," "He that taketh the sword shall perish by the sword!" would sound particularly odd in a military chapel. (39, ch. 5)

Francis Charteris, Craik's example of the failure of the English ruling-class, is also described as classical (e.g. 102, ch. 11 and 315, ch. 33).

²² A form that would have been rejected by many, Henry Mansel, for example (see previous chapter, 96n58 and 98n60). Mansel saw sensation novels, didactic examples in particular, as misjudged attempts to usurp the preacher's role and described sensation novels as "by no means favourable symptoms of the conditions of the body of society." See Mansel, "Sensation Novels," *Quarterly Review* 113 (Apr. 1863): 482 and 512. Mansel also wrote on the Atonement (1858), "rejecting moral objections to sacrifice, whether Christ's or Isaac's, on the Butlerian grounds that divine morals are different from and unknowable by humans" (Hilton 290).

ultimate mystery, the dead male body, the violence at the centre of a religion of love, at the heart of Christian culture, a violence in which all Christians are implicated. Like the liberal theologian Jowett, Craik privileges the "moral and spiritual" sacrifice, but Craik's rejection of the traditional understanding of the Atonement—in Jowett's words "the pouring out of blood upon the earth"—is not a rejection of physicality.²³ Perhaps Craik's most shocking use of iconography is that of the embrace, a motif suggesting the Piéta/Deposition and the Good Samaritan, an image that reconciles love and violence, life and death: Dr Urquhart's loving embrace of the swooning Dora (231, ch. 24) resonates with the murderer's embrace of her brother's corpse (239, ch. 25), and is also Dora's embrace of the famished fallen woman (301, ch. 32).²⁴

In ultimately rejecting the blood sacrifice Craik replaces the sacrificial victim with the Physician as her central male type of the Atonement.²⁵ While *John Halifax* presented the Christian state as an almost dialectical response to secularity—a simple inversion of the secular—*A Life's* "strange theology" chooses to "bring God's truth into all the circumstances of life" (363, ch. 37) through a more sophisticated coopting of secular discourse. In the context of mid-century professionalization, Craik's redefinition of medicine as a moral occupation and denial of the clerical ownership of theology (while not going so far as to suggest the physician as a replacement for the clergy—note her use of "amateur" below) is less a rejection of the sacred than an incorporation of the secular into the sacred. Central to both Atonement typology and—as a practitioner of medicine—Crimean discourse, the physician is situated at the interface of secular and sacred. In terms of the theological paradigm of progressive revelation (155, ch. 16) the Physician takes over the preacher's interpretative authority

²³ Jowett "On Atonement and Satisfaction" (1855). See above, introduction 12n14. One might note in passing that Jowett's essay was written during the Crimean War.

²⁴ This may in fact be an oblique reference to contemporary imaging of the "Indian Mutiny"—a subtextual paralleling of the Crimean male victim and the female Cawnporian "martyr" (as portrayed in Paton's *In Memoriam*; see above, n17).

²⁵ On one level *A Life* is a Christian allegory reworking types of the Atonement—Christus Victor, law court, prison, sacrificial victim and so forth—into a highly contemporary narrative.

precisely because of this location at the interface: because he has the cure of both body and soul (e.g. 157, ch. 16).²⁶ This is emphatically not a case of a secular hermeneutic replacing a sacred. Dr Urquhart is carefully positioned outside of his profession, an individual who describes himself as "an amateur demonstrator of spiritual anatomy" (18, ch. 3) and whose theological understanding is supported rather than threatened by scientific discourse:

he believed moral and physical evil to be so bound up together, that it was idle to attack one without trying to cure the other. He thought, better than all building of gaols and reformatories, or even of churches—since the Word can be spread abroad without need of bricks and mortar—would be the establishing of sanitary improvements in our great towns, and trying to teach the poor, not how to be taken care of in workhouses, prisons, and hospitals, but how to take care of themselves, in their own homes. [...] "The doctor" has, of all persons, the greatest influence among the poor [...]. (161, ch. 16)

Despite Urquhart's distaste for institutions he later works as Gaol Surgeon to a "great prison," "a model of its kind, on the solitary, sanitary, and moral improvement system [...]" (290, ch. 31). The "separate system" was, in fact, promoted by Evangelicals; it was understood to prevent moral contamination and introduce new opportunities to minister to the individual.²⁷ That sin has a pathology and is therefore curable is crucial to the text's "strange theology": the "one clear doctrine, namely, that any sin, however great, being repented of and forsaken, is by God, and ought to be by man, altogether pardoned, blotted out, and done away" (155, ch. 16).²⁸ The "separate

²⁶ Like Nightingale Craik posits Nature as the ultimate Physician (129, ch. 14), namely God (132, ch. 14), disallowing an overelevation of the secular by reminding us of medicine and its practitioner's place as the "handmaid" of Providence.

²⁷ See M. Heather Tomlinson, "Penal Servitude 1846-1865: A System in Evolution," *Policing and Punishment in Nineteenth Century Britain*, ed. Victor Bailey (London: Croom Helm, 1981) 129.

²⁸ For the replacement of a forensic with an organicist or incarnatory imaging of sin and atonement, so that "in moral as in physical disease, 'while there is life there is hope,'" see Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts* 196. Theodora and Max believe in universal atonement as did John McLeod

system," however, is represented as more Utilitarian than Christian and as inimical to reformation, reducing humanity to "a herd of brute beasts," "their bodies well looked after, but their souls—they might scarcely have any! They are simply Nos. 1, 2, 3, and so on, with nothing of human individuality or responsibility about them" (290, ch. 31).

The popularity of the "separate system" at mid-century was in response to the threat posed by the criminal body. As Christopher Hamlin notes, all "brands" of mid-Victorian pathology share a common "image of how the pure was corrupted by contact with impurity and in the process transformed into a replica of impurity that would perpetuate further corruption."²⁹ The criminal body was a new and pressing problem for the mid-Victorians: due to the simultaneous rejection of traditional methods of disposal (death and transportation) society was having to consider the relationship between this body and the larger social body for the first time.

The most prominent image of a shared moral and physical pathology, however, the mid-century body that "best" incorporated and expressed this shared pathology, was the prostitute: "a canker on the body politic whose presence was necessarily contaminating."³⁰ She was also seen more specifically as a canker on the military: as a result of the drive for reform brought about by the Crimean exposé some medical men and army officials began to push for contagious diseases legislation as early as 1857,

Campbell in his *The Nature of the Atonement, and Its Relation to Remission of Sins and Eternal Life* (1856), a central work in the reconceptualisation of the Atonement, and one that stressed the fatherhood of God. See Storr 424-28. Craik was criticised in the *Christian Remembrancer* ("Our Female Novelists," 38 [1859]: 308) for the idea that repentance abrogated all punishment (Fryckstedt 69).

Elizabeth Jay suggests a causal relationship between "Utilitarian" penology and Evangelical eschatology: "theories of penal reform which concentrated upon deterrent and reformatory purposes perhaps had their effect in minimizing the belief in the efficacy of the retributive aspects of hell" (Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1979] 87).

²⁹ Christopher Hamlin, "Providence and Putrefaction," *Victorian Studies* 28 (Spring 1985): 389. Hamlin shows the bizarre extent to which the divine text (and Atonement theology) was aligned with scientific discourse:

[T]he inventors of the A.B.C. process, a relatively long-lived precipitation process employing alum, blood, and clay, as its main ingredients, were inspired by Hebrews 9:22 ("All things are by law purged with blood") to include in their recipe a tiny portion of cow's blood to convey "life" to the precipitated sludge, and hence to the crops to which it was applied. (398)

³⁰ Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 81.

legislation which was to protect soldiers by inspecting and confining prostitutes.³¹ The "fallen woman" was thus "aetiologically" implicated in Crimean discourse, as a scapegoat for the state of the army. The mid-century fallen woman is also, of course, another type of the sacrificial victim: prostitution being, as Josephine Butler would later characterise it, a "costly and impious sacrifice of souls."³² Like the physician, then, the "fallen woman" is situated at the medical/theological interface.

Although Craik's Lydia Cartwright is not yet, strictly speaking, a prostitute, she is definitely a "kept" woman and her "rescue" demonstrates the shift in Atonement theology.³³ Under the old transactional and "bloody" understanding (exemplified by the Reverend Johnston who initially intends to cut Lydia and her child out of the Christian body),³⁴ Lydia would of necessity have become a prostitute (289-90, ch. 31) or have starved. Her illegitimate child would have become an innocent scapegoat, inevitably and irrevocably a "reprobate" (299, ch. 32), fallen in the theological sense:

³¹ For example: William Acton, *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns: With Proposals for the Control and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (1857). The first Contagious Diseases Act was passed in 1864.

³² From "Address at Croyden" (3 July 1871), quoted in Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lauterbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883*, vol. 2 (New York: Garland, 1983) 163. Butler's "New Abolitionist" campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts recycled Biblical images of freedom from slavery, images themselves part of the Atonement narrative. Like Craik, Butler utilised an "impious" paradigm of sacrifice in her rhetoric in order to represent prostitution as a perversion of Christianity, the practice of a patriarchal society divided along class lines. Here Butler parodies Old Testament typology (the story of Jephthah's daughter, Judges 11: 30-37):

Those gentlemen who make such a noise about the necessity of prostitution too often forget [...] that in order to satisfy the necessity the *dishonour of the daughter of the people* is indispensable, for till now none of the worshippers of medical theories have been found ready to declare a willingness that their own daughters should be sacrificed. (Quoted in Nancy Boyd, *Josephine Butler, Octavia Hill, Florence Nightingale: Three Victorian Women Who Changed Their World*. [London: Macmillan, 1982] 78. Italics original.)

³³ Mitchell notes that "The fallen woman of the 1860s is more likely to be someone with whom the reader will identify," and therefore "her morality may be technically maintained [...]" (Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Woman's Reading, 1835-1880* [Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green UP, 1981] 105). Craik, while saving Lydia from overt prostitution on the one hand, goes further than many authors did in stressing the voluntary nature of Lydia's continuing relationship with Charteris. From the mid-century "rescue" work was increasingly prophylactic, concentrating on rescuing women like Lydia from a potential career in prostitution. See Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984) 109.

³⁴ "I shall forbid them the church and the sacrament; omit them from my charities; and take every lawful means to get them out of the neighbourhood. This for my family's sake, and the parish's—that they may carry their corruption elsewhere" (298, ch. 32). Under Theodora's influence, however, the patriarch ends up offering bread and wine (301, ch. 32).

"It is written, *The seed of evil-doers shall never be renowned*. The sinless must suffer with the guilty" (298, ch. 32, italics original). Under the truly Christian reading of atonement, however, the transaction is replaced by love, and death by life: the prostitute is "reborn" as a mother and a wife, the fallen woman is as she whose "*sins which were many, are forgiven, for she loved much*" (334, ch. 35, italics original). The infant scapegoat is reborn as a "scapegrace" (334, ch. 35), one who will be the salvation of his father (331, ch. 34).

Craik has turned the Crimean aetiology on its head: it is Lydia's seducer, the ruling-class Francis Charteris, almost Governor of "a lovely West Indian Island" (179, ch. 17), who is one of those "worse than murderers, for they destroy both body and soul" (286, ch. 30). Urquhart, the narrative's actual murderer, is, of course, instrumental in the salvation of Lydia. His espousal of a single moral standard for men and women, "the Christian principle of love and marriage" (289, ch. 31), is contrasted with Charteris's duplicitousness. Charteris's moral double-standard (280-81, ch. 30) is proof of his unfitness to rule. The single moral standard (which campaigners would use to argue against the Contagious Diseases Acts) also defines Urquhart in opposition to post-Crimean medical discourse. Again, however, Craik coopts rather than simply rejects secular discourse, reconciling medicine's "happy hooker" (as read by Dr Acton) with the martyred victim of the rescue workers. Lydia, like many of Acton's research subjects, does end up happily married; this only occurs, however, through the agency of Atonement.³⁵ Unlike her lover, Lydia is "of the very best" of the working-classes, a characteristic, Craik had written in *A Woman's Thoughts about Women* (1858), shared by many "Lost Women." Her fall is partly due to her employers' neglect, due in fact to one intimately connected with her employers (Penelope Johnston's fiancé) and whom she is not protected from (*A Woman's Thoughts* 191-92; *A Life* 297-98, ch. 32).

Craik's earlier non-fictional work is a crucial intertext for *A Life* more generally: the novel dramatises many of Craik's earlier essays on the "Woman Question." "Her

³⁵ "Acton's prostitute was a happy and healthy hooker, literally 'gay,'" who would save herself through marrying respectably. Acton's 1857 text became the major source for arguments against rescue work. See Mason 85.

Story" is Theodora's quest to discover the significance of her name, to understand in what sense she is "'the gift of God' [...]. A gift—what for, and to whom?" (3, ch. 1). Like Nightingale's *Cassandra*, Theodora believes that "women as well as men require something to do" (96, ch. 10), but her inability to find the "reasonable service" of Romans 12:1, to answer the question "what am I to do with my life?" (110, ch. 12), pushes her into invalidism and ultimately the desire for death. As Max reminds her, self-destruction is wrong for God demands our "living sacrifice"; we are put on earth "to do good work" (221, ch. 13). As Craik wrote in *A Woman's Thoughts* we all have the "heaven-given honour of being [among] the Workers of the world," an honour with which we fulfil "the duty of self-dependence" (*A Woman's Thoughts* 90, 77, 181ff). Theodora, in fact, is also a murderer, culpable of the "great sin" (as Craik wrote in her essays in terms reminiscent of Nightingale's *Cassandra*), "the massacre of Old Time," "the only mortal gift bestowed equally on every living soul, and excepting the soul, the only mortal loss which is totally irretrievable" (67).

Craik's essays promoted self-dependence for women "in this curious phase of our social history" when marriage is no longer the sole end of a women's existence (77), stressing that "'the patient must minister to herself'" (69). That the turning point for Theodora's health is her betrothal to her physician (she is God's "gift" to Max) and that marriage is *A Life's* final model of Atonement (258, ch. 27) does not negate this. Craik represents marriage as an equal relationship in which Theodora also ministers to the body and spirit of Max (359 ff., ch. 37)—the patient and the physician are interchangeable. Marriage is premised on a single moral standard (289, ch. 31) and a unity of purpose and labour (369, ch. 37). Marriage is the closest type of Atonement because real atonement is divine love, human love partakes of the divine (187, ch. 19). Craik explicitly states that Max's marriage with Dora is a sign of divine forgiveness and itself replaces Max's previous "method of atonement": his fallacious "economic" interpretation of a life for a life (258, ch. 27) under which his life was "owed" (e.g. 186, ch. 18). Craik stresses that lives are linked through love not an economic or

forensic nexus: the debt or duty is transformed into a gift or offering, the debtor becomes a lover, prostitution becomes marriage, punishment becomes forgiveness.

Mitchell notes that "the book's theme assumes the equality of souls and it is structured by a narrower single standard that applies to a guilty man many conventions typical of writing about the unchaste woman. [...] He is virtually a seduced innocent,"³⁶ literally driven to murder. In fact aspects of Max's story are drawn directly from Craik's chapter on "Lost Women" in *A Woman's Thoughts*, and I have already noted the way in which Max is a cross-dressed Nightingale. This androgyny is a feature of Craik's writing; Mitchell suggests that Craik understood sexual difference only in a physical sense.³⁷ Craik herself wrote of the opposition of men and women that it was a "difference [that] will for ever exist" (*A Woman's Thoughts* 158) but also asked:

do we not continually find womanish men and masculine women? and some of the finest types of character we have known among both sexes, are they not often those who combine the qualities of both? Therefore, there must be somewhere a standard of abstract right, including manhood and woman, and yet superior to either. (*A Woman's Thoughts* 73)

As a novelist Craik is involved in realising the Christian body, incarnating abstracts. She locates her text in the perceived gap between mastertexts and social practices—the Christian bible and mid-century British culture. But Craik did not believe ultimately there was such a gap; as she wrote in *A Woman's Thoughts*, "there are no such distinctions as 'secular' and 'religious'" (183). The physician, military victory, law, debt, the fallen woman—all are at once Biblical types and contemporary debates. And

³⁶ Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel* 115.

³⁷ "It seems possible that Mrs. Craik really does not see any difference between the sexes except that women are physically less strong; otherwise men and women have the same aims, the same drives, and the same fashion of loving" (*The Fallen Angel* 113-14). It appears Craik also differentiated the sexes according to sexual appetite, describing women as "mercifully constituted with less temptation to evil than men" (*A Woman's Thoughts* 189).

any resolution—atonement—occurs here and now, not in the abstract; Craik utterly rejects "that doctrinal theology which views as totally evil the same world which its Creator pronounced to be 'very good'" (*A Woman's Thoughts* 159).

In many respects, *A Life* is a revision or reworking of *John Halifax, Gentleman*.³⁸ *A Life* is resolutely topical; if "everywhere was Home" (370, ch. 37) then the home is a public and present domain. The anxieties that infected *Halifax's* rural arcadia are revisited and exposed: *A Life's* prodigal son does not return, the incipient fratricide has already occurred. The human father can sacrifice his own children. The innocent can be seduced. The clergyman can be wrong. Craik's novel is, in fact, an exposé of "the skeleton in the closet" of bourgeois domesticity, and, given that "everywhere was Home," the State. The fallen woman was something of a mid-century fetish and one expects to find her outcast body as a model for the new Christianity with its social emphasis. Few, however, rewrote domesticity and indeed the social body more generally around the impure woman,³⁹ let alone the convicted murderer. But this for Craik is Atonement, the answer to "'the great question of our time'" (155, ch. 16)—the relationship between transgression and the social body—is the reincorporation of the transgressive body.

2. *A Beleaguered City* (1880): "Sharp" Sentiment and a Poetics of Faith and Doubt

It is not quite enough for a volume, and perhaps it is too much for two numbers of the Magazine. As I think, however, that it is worth something, I send it to

³⁸ Craik herself described it as a "companion to the former" novel (*A Life*, introduction iv).

³⁹ In fact Elizabeth Langland considers the cross-class marriage to become non-narratable in the nineteenth century, a plot in direct opposition to middle-class women's role as class guardians. See Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture*, Reading Women Writing (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 4. Robin Gilmour, however, notes of the Pre-Raphaelites' relationships with their lower-class models that "Marriage with these women had become a possibility; it was in the air [...]," citing Clough's *The Bothie of Toper-na-Fuosich* (1848). See Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-90*, Longman Literature in English Ser. (London: Longman, 1993) 213.

Both Gaskell's eponymous Ruth (1853) and Eliot's Hetty Sorrell from *Adam Bede* (which along with *A Life* was the novel most in demand from libraries in 1859 [see Mitchell, *Dinah Mulock Craik* 105]) eventually suffer expulsion from the social body.

you. [...] I have wasted a good deal of time upon it, which is foolish, but the subject struck my fancy. (Margaret Oliphant, "To John Blackwood," 4 Dec. 1878)

It is a story which I like—a thing that does not always happen with my own productions—and I should like to republish it. [...] I have a kind of fancy of making a kind of Christmas present of it to my unknown friends, I should like it to come out exactly at Christmas, and to be published quite cheaply, as an experiment. ("To Mr. Craik" [of Macmillan's], 25 Aug. 1880)⁴⁰

The "experiment"—initially published in *New Quarterly Magazine* (Jan, 1879)—was republished in book form as *A Beleaguered City, Being a Narrative of Certain Recent Events in the City of Semur, in the Department of the Haute Bourgogne, A Story of the Seen and the Unseen* (1880). Robert Louis Stevenson wrote to Oliphant of his experience with this bureaucratic narrative: "I look in vain for anything like it since the *Pilgrim's Progress*—or before. How it might read to posterity, is a thing neither I nor you can tell: but to your contemporaries, as to some others, it will be truly good news. [...] I have cried heartily; I feel the better for my tears."⁴¹

Stevenson's response is, in fact, rather strange. Although the novella is not devoid of pathos, Oliphant's later works in her self-designated "genre" "Tales of the Seen and the Unseen" (the "Little Pilgrim" tales, for example) would seem to fit more comfortably into the category of sentimentally cathartic literature than what has been read recently as a "sharp feminist critique of a money-centred, patriarchal

⁴⁰ *Autobiography and Letters of Mrs Margaret Oliphant*, ed. Mrs Harry Coghill (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1974) 276 and 286.

⁴¹ Robert Louis Stevenson, "To Margaret Oliphant," n.d., NLS Acc. 5678/1. Quoted in Merryn Williams, *Margaret Oliphant* 119.

community."⁴² This disjunction between nineteenth- and recent twentieth-century⁴³ critical perspectives is, however, illuminating and I want to explore the relation between the two readings—*A Beleaguered City* as religious literature and as feminist social critique—in this section. Stevenson's contemporary reading stresses the text's place in the tradition of religious literature: the comparison with *A Pilgrim's Progress* clearly highlights the allegorical nature of the work; "truly good news" welcomes it as a gospel for the times. Of course pathos and social critique were by no means considered mutually exclusive terms by the Victorians but Oliphant's experiment in multinarration is highly sophisticated and sometimes sharply ironic. As well as the use of the ironic voice and the parodic episode—targeting bourgeois materialism and separate spheres ideology, for example—Oliphant's sustained literary and theological play on the dead metaphor—"It is enough to make the dead rise out of their graves"⁴⁴—links *A Beleaguered City* back to her earlier parodic "Christmas Tale"⁴⁵ and to such texts as *Salem Chapel*, rather than into a straightforwardly sentimental tradition.

Semur is a city at war with itself, where *le bon Dieu* has become "an affair of the grandmothers" and religion "the foolish scruples of women" (9), "prejudices" to be respected merely as a social nicety (e.g. 6), a community in which for many of the men "Vive l'argent! [...] is the only *bon Dieu*" (5) and "*le bon Dieu c'est l'argent* [...] is their creed" (9). But for Semur the writing is on the wall, or the Cathedral door to be

⁴² Esther H. Schor, rev. of *Margaret Oliphant: A Critical Biography*, by Merryn Williams, *Nineteenth Century Literature* 42 (Mar. 1988): 518.

⁴³ In finding only embarrassing Victorian sentimentality, however, Q. D. Leavis's estimation is closer to Stevenson's than Schor's, summarising the "Tales of the Seen and the Unseen" as

a literary curiosity [...] a group of tales of supernatural experiences with a *frisson* of a spiritual or professedly mystical nature, which seem to me to have been over-rated then and since. Though Mrs Oliphant valued them highly herself and some have Dantean overtones, they represent a self-indulgence, the complement of her hard-headed professional self which required some non-dogmatic vaguely religious sustenance. (Q. D. Leavis, introduction, *Autobiography and Letters of Mrs Margaret Oliphant*, ed. Mrs Harry Coghill 22.)

⁴⁴ Oliphant, "A Beleaguered City" 1880, *A Beleaguered City and Other Stories*, ed. Merryn Williams, The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 5. Further references will occur in the text.

⁴⁵ Retitled "Witcherley Ways: A Christmas Tale" to alert the reader to its deliberately playful use of the supernatural, the tale was republished by Blackwoods in 1879, the year of the first version of *A Beleaguered City*. See Elisabeth Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself": A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 158.

exact: "from moment to moment there appeared before us, in letters that seemed to blaze and flicker, something that looked like a great official placard. [...] 'Go! leave this place to us who know the true signification of life'" (25); and the dead do, in fact, rise from their graves and usurp the places of the living. Oliphant's choice of "signification" rather than significance, even in her English translation of the oft repeated phrase, is crucial. As Esther Schor notes, the "encroachment of the Unseen on the Seen causes an interpretative crisis."⁴⁶ Oliphant's multinarrated text, documenting varying attempts to embody experience and decipher the text of the dead, shows that questions of hermeneutics—of meaning—also imply matters of representation—of signification. Oliphant uses the fantasy genre to create a space beyond the confines of institutional discourses: "here there were no doctrines, nothing but that pregnant phrase, *La vraie signification de la vie*" (28). In this space she conducts an investigation into what I will call the "poetics" of faith and doubt.

Although Jay minimises the role of biblical criticism as a source for *A Beleaguered City*, central issues of biblical criticism are clearly under investigation. Oliphant is using the space provided by both the genre, "hovering between the limitations of the terrestrial and the freedom of the supernatural, [that enables] the exploration of problems that might be self-destructive or blasphemous in real life,"⁴⁷ and the foreign Roman-Catholic setting, in order to explore relationships between text and truth, and experience and representation. In Oliphant's own non-fiction, her review of Principal Tulloch's lectures on Renan for example, historical criticism of the bible was represented as

entirely destructive in a religious point of view. It has nothing whatever to substitute for the hopes and consolations it takes from us. [...] The multitude

⁴⁶ Esther H. Schor, "The Haunted Interpreter in Margaret Oliphant's Supernatural Fiction," *Women's Studies* 22 (1993) rpt. in Trela 91.

⁴⁷ Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 161 and 158.

have never been affected by the winds of doctrine which blow about the higher altitudes of intellect [...]. Christianity itself does not undertake to satisfy all the questions of the wistful spirit, but there is nothing else which makes any response at all out of the awful darkness [...of death].⁴⁸

In *A Beleaguered City* the avowedly orthodox Oliphant has cleared a space where she can construct and deconstruct a "poetics of doubt." Although Oliphant does not suggest, like her friend Henry James in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), that the supernatural experience is delusory, she does render its authenticity or verifiability at least questionable: it is contained within the mass subjectivities of the citizens of Semur, there is no outside corroboration.⁴⁹ It is also contained within time and "passed absolutely as if it had never been" (109). With Mère Julie's haute couture vision of the angels (99) and the somnambulistic "revelation of Pierre Plastron" Oliphant demonstrates in analytical detail the process of mythologising:

What he [Pierre Plastron] had seen and what he had heard was wonderful. All the saints had come and talked with him, and told him what he was to say [...]. They told him exactly how everything had happened: how St. Jean himself had interfered on behalf of the Sisters, and how, if we were not more attentive on the duties of religion, certain among us would be bound hand and foot and cast into the jaws of hell. [...] as soon as I knew that this folly had been printed and was in every house, I hastened to M. le Curé [...] "These are lies, nothing but lies. Either he has deceived the poor ladies basely, or they themselves—but this is what I cannot believe."

⁴⁸ Oliphant, "The Life of Jesus," *Blackwood's* 96 (Oct. 1864): 430-31. Her daughter Maggie had died in January of this year.

⁴⁹ "Our entire separation from the world was indeed one of the strangest details of this terrible period. [...] no stranger came to see our miserable plight." Some townsmen flee to neighbouring towns spreading varied accounts which are disbelieved (44).

[...] "Have you never discovered yet how strong is self-delusion? There will be no lying of which they are aware. Figure to yourself what a stimulus to the imagination to know that he was here, actually here. Even I—it suggests a hundred things to me. The Sisters will have said to him (meaning no evil, nay meaning the edification of the people), 'But, Pierre, reflect! You must have seen this and that. Recall thy recollections a little.' And by degrees Pierre will have found out that he remembered—more than could have been hoped."

"*Mon Dieu!*" I cried, out of patience, "and you know all this, yet you will not tell them the truth—the very truth."

"To what good?" he said. (112-13)

To the mayor, M. Dupin, it is clear that Plastron's text features in a "crusade of false religion" (112). Despite the visionary Lecamus's view, on the one hand, that "'One does not try to explain [...] one longs to know—that is all'" (19),⁵⁰ and M. Dupin's rationalist desire to produce a uniform and authoritative account of the events on the other, Oliphant shows how both the drive to explain, or represent experience, and the impossibility of this being uniform are inevitable. Even Lecamus attempts to communicate his experience "beyond words." Oliphant has cleared a "space" where there is "nothing but that pregnant phrase—la vraie signification de la vie." In this "space" grow what become, with the collusion of the Church, the necessary "fictions" of faith.

The poetics of the text itself, an elaboration of the dead metaphor, write the dialectic of faith and doubt. Ironically, the text's controlling figure is the figure for both impiety and ultimate faith. What has been a cliché is first made strange: "'The dead rise out of their graves!' These words, though one has heard them before, took possession of my imagination" (5), then, becoming a "*refrain*" (6), this strangeness, literariness

⁵⁰ This is the position the Colbys believed Oliphant herself held: "The more profound aspects of theology eluded her, or she ignored them. The function of her faith was not to explain [...]" (Vineta Colby and Robert A. Colby, *The Equivocal Virtue: Mrs Oliphant and the Victorian Literary Market Place* [New York: Archon, 1966] 229).

one might say, is highlighted through repetition. Finally, of course, with the takeover of the city of Semur by the dead, the text is literalized, and the dead metaphor reanimated. There is the repeated use of allegorical elements, such as the pattern of three days and rebirth (33 and 55, 87). The answer to the text of the dead—"la vraie signification de la vie"—is ironically, the dead text: "there was no explanation, nothing but this vraie signification de la vie" (25). On the one hand, then, meaning is simply the experience of presence. Lecamus's union with his wife's spirit "was beyond knowledge of speech." "We said to each other everything without words—heart overflowing into heart. But this is not of public signification that I should occupy with it the time of M. le Maire" (59).

It is of course women who are "not of public signification": forbidden public voice (49-50) and unable to represent their community (81), traditionally they are also disenfranchised from written representation (88). The publication of *A Beleaguered City* in 1880 coincided with Oliphant's first public affirmation of the women's suffrage movement,⁵¹ and her critique of materialism is intimately related to her critique of separate spheres. As the Colbys note, Oliphant has located the tale in a time and place where the secular has "won,"⁵² that sees the "flourishing of that bourgeois mood that Tillich has called 'self-sufficient finitude.'"⁵³ Religion has been feminized, to the

⁵¹ Oliphant, "The Grievances of Women" *Fraser's Magazine* (May 1880). The link between Oliphant's increasing sympathy for women's rights and her depiction of the enforced passivity and lack of voice of the female characters in *A Beleaguered City* (1880) is pointed out by Merryn Williams in her introduction (xi).

⁵² The Colbys note that the story reflects the French intellectual atmosphere of the 1860s and '70s, and is "an inevitable development" from Oliphant's literary work of this period (293), i.e. her biography of Montalembert and prior translation of his *Monks of the West*. Her review of Montalembert's biography of Lacordaire, another "liberal Catholic" ("Henri Lacordaire," *Blackwood's* 93 [Feb. 1863]: 169-87), the Colbys see as providing the "historical background for *A Beleaguered City*, focusing attention as it does on France as the grand battleground for the socioreligious conflicts of the age" (295). The essay documents the growth of secularism in France but the "analogies between France and England"—"church versus state, science versus religion, theism versus agnosticism, idealism versus materialism"—would not be lost on contemporary readers (297). See Robert Colby and Vineta Colby, "*A Beleaguered City*: A Fable for the Victorian Age," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16 (1962): 283-301. Elisabeth Jay sees the choice of foreign setting as a way to enable social criticism (*Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself* 161).

⁵³ Claude Welch's study of nineteenth-century theology dates this new period from the Franco-Prussian war, a date noted by Oliphant, see below. See Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1: 1799-1870 (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972) 4.

degree that four women make up the Cathedral congregation (89).⁵⁴ As the action opens even this enclave is under attack and the women are quick to see this attack on the sphere of the Sisters of St. Jean, the female religious, as the cause of the supernatural events (23). But while the women's knowledge is privileged by the dead ("the women had been instructed, [...] they had listened, and were safe. [...] 'Our brothers have forgotten; but when we speak, they will hear'" [63]) Oliphant's text is primarily a critique of a society in which women are the repository of religion. Here, as M. Dupin comforts his wife Agnès, both the account-book approach to salvation and the angelic nature of women⁵⁵ are being parodied, the latter being shown as complicit in the former:

"So long as there are *des anges* like thee to pray for us, the scale will not go down to the wrong side."

I said this, of course, to please my Agnès, who is the best of wives; but on thinking it over after, I could not but be struck with the extreme justice (not to speak of the beauty of the sentiment) of this thought. The *bon Dieu*—if, indeed, that great Being is as represented to us by the Church—must naturally care as much for one-half of His creatures as for the other, though they have not the same weight in the world; and consequently the faith of the women must hold the balance straight, especially if, as is said, they exceed us in point of numbers. This leaves a little margin for those of them who profess the same freedom of thought as is generally accorded to men—a class, I must add, which I abominate from the bottom of my heart. (7-8)

⁵⁴ Ann Douglas presents the feminization of religion in nineteenth-century North America as the outcome of an alliance between nineteenth-century clergy and women, both "disestablished" groups. See Ann Douglas *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1978). Oliphant makes gender a preventative for such an alliance. See *A Beleaguered City* 27.

⁵⁵ Oliphant rebutted the notion that all women were angels: "the general mass of women are [...] as actual demonstration proves, no more angelical than their ruder companions [...]" (Oliphant, "The Laws Concerning Women," *Blackwood's* 79 [Apr. 1856]: 383).

Agnès Dupin, undeniably a saintly woman, sees and hears the dead (when neither the curé [37, 39, 72], nor Mme Veuve Dupin [90] can), and her interpretations are privileged by the other narrators. Agnès, however, is an individual; importantly she is *not* representative of the other women, as Oliphant's later addition of Mme. Veuve Dupin's narrative makes clear.⁵⁶ As Schor writes, *A Beleaguered City* disallows the hermeneutic hegemony of "a univocal, authorized rhetoric, however benign or humane" (384); I would also add, whether male or female. While multinarration is a way of letting women's voices speak, it is not equivalent to making that voice authoritative. Crucially, although science (in the person of M. de Clairon from the Musée [26-28]), bourgeois materialism and the Church are worsted by the party of the Sisters of St. Jean, as the curé prophesied (112), the Sisters' interpretation of affairs is not privileged by the narrative, and, as we have seen, their representations are shown to be manifestly incorrect.

If femaleness in essence does not form an episteme, what the women do share is the experience of marginality, a position they also share with the old and visionary, also able to communicate with the dead. As the Mayor describes it: "Those who were thus transported by a knowledge beyond ours were the weakest among us; most of them were women, the men old or feeble, and some children" (35). This marginality is partly a form of liminality, positioning them on the boundaries of the seen and the unseen; as Mme. Dupin's lonely vigil illustrates (80), this is a position essentially closed to men: Lecamus's accompaniment of Mme. Dupin is the prelude to his death.

Marginality thus produces a kind of power, recognised by all the male authorities. M. Dupin recognises that "though they were weak they were beyond our

⁵⁶ Schor notes that the original published version (*New Quarterly Magazine*, Jan 1879) only included Agnès Dupin; Mme. Veuve Dupin was added when the novella was revised for publication as a separate volume. "The revision (and Oliphant made but a handful of extensive revisions during her prolific career) is crucial: taken together, Chapters viii and ix undermine powerfully Dupin's complacent relegation of women to 'the devout sex.' [...] Oliphant, by revising, substitutes for a pious version of the female voice, a pluralistic array of female voices." See Schor, "The Haunted Interpreter in Margaret Oliphant's Supernatural Fiction" 102, 104. These voices are in fact represented in the accounts of Agnès and Mme. Veuve Dupin, Agnès's mother-in-law, both types of female piety. The Colbys describe Mme. Veuve Dupin as a stern Evangelical. See Vineta Colby and Robert A. Colby, *The Equivocal Virtue* 93; "A Beleaguered City: A Fable for the Victorian Age" 288.

strength to guide" (35), the curé knows that "they will conquer." M. de Bois Sombre, the aristocrat, asks parenthetically "(are not all visionaries revolutionaries?)" (80) but is willing to have the Reverend "ladies in our front" (78) on the return to Semur. When Agnès preaches "submit" the mayor accuses his wife of being a "traitor" (48), of desertion to "our enemies" (47). With the women's "camp" at La Clairière Oliphant imagines a secular sisterhood. Like the Sisters of St. Jean the women are outside the direct control of male authority (112) but, like both the sisters and Lecamus, their subversive potential (recognised by Mme. Veuve Dupin)⁵⁷ is equally contained, equally parenthetical.

Such power can open subjects to the experience of presence, but this is not enough to save a community in crisis, to unite the sign and the significance: "'Neither will they believe—though one rose from the dead'" (66). For meaning to become presence, it must be embodied; "public signification," representation of the central body of Christianity, is crucial. The mass is, of course, Christianity's central "public signification" "de la vie" and another reason for the foreign setting of *A Beleaguered City* is the way the Roman Catholic context allows Oliphant to draw on the full force of the sacraments. The non-performance of the mass symbolises the community at war with itself. Due to complaints of disturbance the daily mass at the Hospital of St. Jean is suspended, the opening between the chapel and hospital shut up, symbolising the rupture between the sacred and secular, church and state, men and women. The later celebrations of the mass in the Cathedral symbolise not merely the atonement of the divine and human but also that of Church and State (in the celebration by the curé and M. Dupin that marks the end of the siege), and that of men and women (in the service of thanks on the community's return to the city).

Importantly these truces, these experiences of atonement, can be but temporary; when M. de Bois-Sombre "promise[s] everything—submission," a woman points out "with a hysterical sound of laughter in her tears. 'Sante Mère! it will be heaven upon

⁵⁷ Who sees Mme. Dupin as an "enthusiast", overturning social convention (94).

earth" (52). Oliphant stresses the performative aspect of liturgy; in the world separated from God, the world of irony, signification needs to be reiterated, rehearsed. Jay notes how in another work Oliphant formulates a "doctrine of repeated sacrifice [that] comes dangerously near an understanding of the sacrament at odds with Protestant teaching."⁵⁸ Oliphant has the Church pronounce: "Women do not discriminate the lawful from the unlawful: so long as they produce an effect, it does not matter to them" (27). Ironically, however, it is M. Dupin who ends up in the feminine position, his "crusade [against] false religion" dismissed as "prejudices" (113), his very attempt to "arrange and edit the different accounts of the mystery, as to present one coherent and trustworthy chronicle to the world" (10) becomes a multivocal parody of itself. Together the voices represent the social body at one with itself—Church and state, male and female. Multinarration is thus a form of representing the social body as a Christian community, a community as represented in the signs left by the dead—the olive branch and the prominently placed desk (71 and 70)—a community which is at peace with itself but where different voices can and indeed must, speak. The multinarrative is the textual embodiment of the knowledge of "la vraie signification de la vie," the required performance of atonement, that writes the text of the dead from impiety to faith, the writing which gives life to the "silent sign" (70).

3. Conclusion

Both Oliphant's *A Beleaguered City* and Craik's *A Life for a Life* are written around bodies that demand signification. This demand grows out of the crisis of faith, in each case shown to be both an hermeneutical and representational crisis. Craik asks "the great question of our time," the relation of the transgressive body to the social body, within the tradition of Domestic Realism, aligning actual political, social and theological "events." Oliphant considers "la vraie signification de la vie," the text of the

⁵⁸ Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 155.

dead, in the spaces created by the Fantasy genre and a foreign political and religious setting.

In both cases the crises of interpretation and representation produce experimental narratologies, and a translation of subjective into public discourse. In both texts narratology is related at once to theology and gender ideology. Craik's text is a binary dualism, a parallel his- and herstory that ultimately resolves into marriage, the text's symbol of atonement. The domestic engulfs the public, "everywhere was Home," the journal becomes public, history is subsumed into herstory. Oliphant's text is multivocal and its voices are held in tension, they do not and cannot resolve permanently into one. "Heaven on earth" is an ironic statement and marriage only a type for at-one-ment when one party is dead.

According to Philippa Levine's definition, Craik's *A Woman's Thoughts about Women* is a feminist text: promoting female self-dependence and offering the shared experience of gender as a solution to the divisions brought about by class. Many of the stances that Craik took in *A Life* later became the positions of what Levine calls the "post Contagious Diseases Acts [feminist] movement" of the 1870s and '80s: Teetotalism, for example, and the social purity movement more generally (not all feminist) with its emphasis on a single moral standard. Levine also stresses the importance of the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts to the development of feminist discourse—the way in which it extended feminist discourse into sexual and moral politics.⁵⁹ Craik makes sisterhood crucial to the reformation of the ruling classes. Oliphant's text is a social critique of a society in which women are the repositories of religion and sisterhood exists only within a circumscribed marginality; Oliphant's feminist critique is not in itself a feminist programme. Like Craik, Oliphant questions the relationship between theological and feminine self-sacrifice⁶⁰: if "Neither

⁵⁹ Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England* 8, 87 and 86.

⁶⁰ In *A Woman's Thoughts* Craik provides classic statements of the relationship: "*a woman—[...] the creature who, with all her imperfections, is nearer to heaven than man, in one particular—she 'loves much.'* And loving is so frequently, nay, inevitably, identical with suffering, either with, or for, or from, the object beloved [...]" (179, italics original); "it is the divine law that we should all, like our Master, be 'made perfect through suffering'" (187).

will they believe—though one rose from the dead!" "Must we be prepared to give up all if we would be perfected?" (98). Unlike Craik, however, Oliphant does not rework these negative formulations. Public discourse coopts the private for the good of society, but the women's narratives remain contained by the male voice. Subversion may be potential but it is contained. Craik's liberal theology mirrors her social liberalism: a refusal to believe in eternal punishment means a refusal to support capital punishment. Ironically it is Craik's Realist narrative that paints a utopia, and Oliphant's fantasy that returns to the quotidian. The events at Semur "passed absolutely as if [they] had never been" (109).

The text, however, remains. While both authors explore the gap between the master-texts and social practices of a culture as part of their cultural critiques, Oliphant's text does not simply point to a disjunction between the two. In the gap where "there were no doctrines" she develops, not a new theology or a Craikian resurrection of "strange doctrines," but a poetics of faith and doubt that works a dialectic between the two. Atonement is not reenacted, or reinscribed through marriage but occurs within the text itself. Although, as Jay notes, Oliphant had chastised Maurice for his perceived marginalization of the Crucifixion, she herself effectively marginalizes the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice.⁶¹ If "Neither will they believe—though one rose from the dead" Oliphant will write a mass resurrection, a parody of Presence that simultaneously deliteralizes and textualizes theology, its representation of plurality leading to a resurrection of significance. The Word, alone, is not enough and in this sense her multinarrative is an insurrection.

Oliphant foregrounds the historical shift between mid-century and the time of her tale, and its application to Britain, by "recollect[ing] the trenches before Sebastopol, and all that [the French] and the English endured there" and then immediately noting "But how different was it!" (43). In the more recent past is the Franco-Prussian War (and its bloody aftermath, the Paris Commune 1871, another city at war with itself), but

⁶¹ Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 153-57.

this was "nothing to what we encountered now. [...] here the dangers were such as we could not understand" (95). This is a crisis where there are "no weapons, nor any against whom to wield them. We [...] helpless [...] trying to penetrate the darkness before us" (43).

Craik's text appears in the penumbra of the mid-century, reflecting its sense of "equipoise" in both its poetics and plot, and its optimism and naïvety.⁶² Although Max and Dora's emigration points beyond such certainties, *A Life For a Life* still reflects "the common cultural context" that held sway until 1859,⁶³ that "literary and intellectual watershed [...] described by several recent critics as an *annus mirabilis*,"⁶⁴ which Craik shared with *Adam Bede*, Darwin's *Origin* and Mill's *On Liberty*, just preceding *Essays and Reviews*. Oliphant, on the other hand, self-consciously evokes a world in which "common knowledge" is disappearing; the common intellectual discourse that, especially in her role as a periodical writer, she had helped create, was breaking down.⁶⁵ *A Beleaguered City* was published at the opening of a new period in religious history: "a fundamental and broadly-based change in the ethos, nature, and status of

⁶² W. L. Burn, *The Age of Equipoise: A Study of the Mid-Victorian Generation* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964).

⁶³ Robin Gilmour notes that "until *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) at least" there was a "common cultural context" which "kept the discoveries of science in touch with the moral, religious, and aesthetic concerns of the informed general reader" (*The Victorian Period* 8).

⁶⁴ Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period: 1830-1890*, 2nd ed., Longman Literature in English Ser. (1985, London: Longman, 1994) 101-02.

⁶⁵ [U]ntil the 1860s or so intellectual debate was not the preserve of the specialist and the expert, but part of the wider discourse which thoughtful men and women could share by reading the magazines and periodicals in which the latest developments in science, philosophy, religion, and politics were reviewed. As these reviews were usually long and contained lengthy excerpts from the work in question, it was possible to derive an informed awareness of contemporary intellectual and cultural life from the reviews alone. Moreover, the prestige and comprehensiveness of the great periodicals (a nineteenth-century phenomenon in itself) helped to sustain a common discourse. A subscriber to the *Edinburgh Review* or the *Quarterly* was accustomed to move from [...] a review of Tennyson's poems to a discussion of the latest work in geology, from an article on contemporary astronomy to one on the Oxford movement, without feeling that science, literature, and theology belonged in separate intellectual compartments. (Gilmour, *The Victorian Period* 7)

As already noted, the Colbys describe Oliphant as "something of an apostle of culture to the magazine reading public" (Vineta Colby and Robert A. Colby, *The Equivocal Virtue* xii-xiii). Clearly Oliphant's editorship of Blackwood's *Foreign Classics for English Readers*, a series of introductory volumes, is another example of this cultural evangelism.

religion in Victorian Britain in the period after approximately 1880," when the "Victorian facade of religious consensus began to crumble," a period marked by fragmentation and diversification.⁶⁶ Against the "darkness" Oliphant places the desk and the writer as one of the "indispensable" "race of middlemen,"⁶⁷ writing against fragmentation, but not against difference, the multinarrative revalorizing a "common knowledge" that rejects the univocal and the institutional: "Let" the priest "say what he will. He is not God that we should put him above all. There were other saints with other thoughts [...]" (114).

⁶⁶ Gerald Parsons is using Hugh McLeod's framework from *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (1974). See introduction, *Religion in Victorian Britain*, vol. 2: *Controversies*, ed. Gerald Parsons (Manchester: Manchester UP in association with the Open University, 1988) 7 and 9.

⁶⁷ Oliphant, *The Literary History of England in the End of the Eighteenth and Beginning of the Nineteenth Century* vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1882) 35.

Chapter Four. Revelation and the "fairy Order": Craik's *Olive* (1850) and the Politics and Poetics of Religious Literacy

Like the fairy Order in the nursery tale, she takes up the tangled threads of your mind, and reduces them to regularity, till you distinguish a clear pattern through the ugly maze. (Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts* 187)

A true fairy tale must also be a prophetic account of things—an ideal account [...]. A true writer of fairy tales sees into the future. [Fairy tales are] confessions of a true, a synthetic child—of an ideal child. (A child is a good deal cleverer and wiser than an adult—but the child must be an ironic child.) Novalis¹

This chapter considers Craik's simultaneously political and theological use of fairy, and the way she uses it to write the female artist and her text as the redeemer of social and religious patriarchy. In order to locate Craik's novel in relation to fairy, I begin by outlining the contested history of fairy tale, a genre and discourse whose political status remains at issue.

1. Introduction: Fairy Tale and Politics

Modern critics have widely differing views of fairy's relationship to hegemony. Fairy has been read as a survival of a pre-Christian matriarchal age or as a perfidious instrument of patriarchy indoctrinating girl-children.² Rosemary Jackson's study of

¹ Quoted in Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage-Random, 1995) 188.

² A classic statement of "perfidious patriarchy" is from Jennifer Waelti-Walters's introductory chapter to her study of feminist revisions of what she reads as patriarchal myth, *Fairy Tales and the Female Imagination* (Montreal: Eden, 1982) 1-2:

The reading of fairy tales is one of the first steps in the maintenance of a misogynous, sex-role stereotyped patriarchy, for what is the end product of these stories by [sic] a lifeless humanoid, malleable, decorative, and interchangeable—that is, a "feminine woman" who is inherited, bartered or collected in a monstrous game of Monopoly.

fantasy distinguishes what she terms "faery" from fantasy along a psycho-political axis; typing "faery" as nostalgic, monologic, conservative, and "fantasy" as liberating and radically critical.³ Marina Warner's impressive study also distinguishes fairy tale from fantasy; however, she cites the way fairy tale was utilised in seventeenth-century France as a way for women to speak emancipation under conditions of censorship (168-69, 411) and notes that "Fairy tale constituted in itself a genre of protest; at the level of content it could describe wrongs and imagine vindications and freedom; from the point of view of form, it was presented as modern, homegrown, comic fabulism, ironically suited to express the thoughts of an inferior group" (163). Many of the elements Warner identifies as characteristics of fairy tale—its focus on the family drama, its moral function, the happy ending, and its status as a female tradition⁴—have clear affinities with the Domestic Novel. Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher's study of Victorian fairy and fantasy sees them both as comprising an alternative, "female" tradition, as forms opposed to the didactic, religious writing that, together with Realism, helped to constrain their radical potential at mid-century.⁵

Enchanted ground was debatable ground, however, and Victorian fairy tale was already a contested narrative in terms of its history, its focal position in eighteenth-century debates over literacy and the role of fancy, and its religio-political alignments and ramifications. Eighteenth-century Rationalists and Evangelicals alike linked fairy and the novel, rejecting both as genres of fancy, preferring Jabez Bunting's "Plain sense, expressed in plain words," as "most likely to be of ultimate use to our hearers."⁶ Alan Richardson shows how the late eighteenth-century debates over suitable children's literature were implicated in the "politics of literacy" and demonstrates that the accepted

³ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1981).

⁴ Warner e.g. xv, xvi, xix, 168.

⁵ Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, eds., *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992).

⁶ Jabez Bunting in T. P. Bunting *The Life of Jabez Bunting D.D.* [...] (1859-87) vol. 1, 139. Quoted in Doreen M. Rosman, *Evangelicals and Culture* (London: Croom Helm, 1984) 172.

historical narrative of these debates is a seriously deficient and in fact politically inverted account. The accepted account shapes the debates into a gendered narrative where male Romantics (seen as Radical promoters of fairy and the imagination) won out over that "cursed Barbauld crew" of mainly women writers (seen as Conservative advocates of reason and didacticism). However, not only was religion involved in the "anti-fairy side," complicating its typing as perpetrator of an arid rationalism, but it was the Rationalists, and some Evangelicals, who were politically Radicals; Wordsworth and Coleridge had become social and political conservatives. Fairy was not brought into the mainstream as an agent of subversion; it was fairy's perceived conservatism that helped it become acceptable as children's literature, as did its appropriation to the purposes of the eighteenth-century educationalists.⁷ Indeed Hannah More's weighing of the relative merits of the novel and fairy tale found in fairy's favour—it does not pretend to truth.⁸

Although by the 1850s the question of propriety was largely settled in favour of fairy (and the novel), the debate continued, given fresh relevance by changes in the perception of the nature and status of mythology (which, implicated in discourses of nationalism, has a political as well as a theological dimension).⁹ Fairy might not pretend to truth, and indeed the *kunstmärchen* or invented fairy tale had become popular, but it also represented the popular survival of the "remnants of ancient religious systems, the mental offspring of deep-thinking sages." Mid-century fairy, then, functioned as a trope that united the discourses of literature and religion, highlighting issues of truth and representation;¹⁰ it was also a central trope of domestic

⁷ Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice 1780-1832*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) especially 112-27.

⁸ Rosman 185.

⁹ The high visibility and polyvalence of "mythology" at mid-century is well illustrated by considering the discursive events of 1846. For example: the same year that the antiquarian W. J. Thoms introduced the term "folk lore" into the English language, Maurice delivered a series of lectures published in 1847 as *On the Religions of the World*, Hans Christian Andersen's *kunstmärchen*—invented fairy tales—were first available in English, as was Eliot's translation of Strauss's mythical reading of the New Testament.

¹⁰ See, for example, the title of Thomas Keightley's *The Fairy Mythology, Illustrative of the Romance and Superstition of Various Countries* 1828, new edition 1850 (London: George Bell, 1878). Further illustrating this, Keightley terms his exercise in comparative mythology "the philosophy of popular fiction" (512). Keightley defended his enterprise by equating the study of popular religious

ideology and the ideology of gender. As Dickens's "Frauds on Fairies" demonstrates with its "politically correct" feminist version of Cinderella,¹¹ the earlier gendered narrative continued to inform contemporary discourse, highlighting issues of truth, representation, and the authority to speak, what might be called the politics of religious literacy.

2. *Olive* (1850)

Craik was familiar with fairy discourse and intimately involved with the Victorian development of fairy tale as "something like 'a new genre,'" both collecting fairy tales and writing her own.¹² She uses both the plot and imagery of "fairy" in *Olive* (1850), the story of a female Romantic artist who is also a Victorian angel.¹³

culture with theological studies: "To trace the corruption and degradation of the pure religion of the Gospel, has always been held to be a task worthy of the highest intellect: we should not, therefore, despise the present one, which is the same in kind though different in degree. We have seen that all these legendary beings and their characters and acts are remnants of ancient religious systems, the mental offspring of deep-thinking sages" (512); "all these beings once formed parts of ancient and exploded systems of religion [...] it is chiefly in the traditions of the peasantry that their memorial has been preserved" (13).

¹¹ While Dickens's immediate critical target is George Cruikshank, whose retold fairy tales promoted temperance, Dickens's retelling of Cinderella burlesques the "Woman Question" in particular. Cinderella (a member of the Juvenile Band of Hope since the age of four) goes off to the ball dressed in "rich sky-blue satin pantaloons gathered at the ankle" (115), courtesy of her fairy godmother (a confirmed free-trader). On marriage to her Prince (a Total Abstinence) Cinderella becomes a dictator who gives women the vote, gaining them entry into public life but, consequently, disenfranchisement from love. Dickens "Frauds on the Fairies," *Household Words* 1853, *A Peculiar Gift: Nineteenth Century Writings on Books for Children*, ed. Lance Sodway (Harmondsworth: Penguin-Kestrel, 1976) 111-18. Perhaps some further light is thrown on Dickens's view on the relationship between fairy and domestic and gender ideology by his admission that: "Little Red Riding Hood was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss." Quoted in Michael Patrick Hearn, ed. *The Victorian Fairy Tale Book* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) xxi.

¹² Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher 3.

In 1852 Craik published the fairy tale *Alice Learmount*, in which *Olive's* central paradigm—child becomes woman by rescuing a male, and looking after her mother—is recast entirely in the Scottish and border country folklore that backgrounds *Olive*. Craik is in fact one of the more famous of the Victorian fairy writers, *The Little Lambe Prince and his Travelling Cloak* 1875 is still republished in collections today. Craik also helped define the genre by editing what Macmillan hoped would be a definitive collection, a fairy canon: *The Fairy Book; The Best Popular Fairy Stories Selected and Rendered Anew* 1863. In collecting and arranging traditional fairy tales, Craik aligned herself with the folklorists, including such traditional English tales as "Jack and the Beanstalk." Unlike many other mid-Victorians, Craik did not turn the stories into didactic exercises, and on the whole remained close to her sources.

Mitchell discusses Craik's "Fairy Lore," *Dinah Mulock Craik* 82-86.

¹³ Dinah Craik, *Olive; and, The Half-Caste*, Oxford Popular Fiction (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996).

Ostensibly *Olive* is the story of the journey from Art to Religion, from Romanticism to Romance, from the realm of "fairy" to the domain of the "angel in the house." While *Olive* begins as a female Künstlerroman, the "deformed" (and therefore unmarriedable) Olive Rothesay devoting herself to a life of art and filial devotion, it mutates halfway through into what Margaret Maison has called a "feeble rescue story,"¹⁴ with Olive, "feeling less of an artist and more of a woman," transferring her dedication to the saving of the Reverend Harold Gwynne's soul. Olive not only saves Harold's soul for Christianity, she also redeems his faith in womankind. ("From you I have learned to have faith in Heaven, peace towards men, reverence for woman" [260-61].) With his love "the curse of hopeless deformity" (14) is lifted and Olive is reabsorbed into the domestic.

A text which initially reads as religiously and politically conservative, however, also reads as theologically and politically innovative. While the "male doubter saved by the influence of a good woman" plot was adopted enthusiastically by women novelists and thus came to characterise the novel of doubt, *Olive* was one of its first expositions.¹⁵ *Olive* is also less conventional than it may initially appear in another sense: embedded within the increasingly conventional plot is a feminist soteriology, and while the novel is a classic, but fictionalised, instance of the feminization of religion in Ann Douglas's sense, an alliance between woman and the clergy,¹⁶ this is an alliance that is located *outside* the church. Craik, in effect, creates a new "religious field" and situates it in the debatable ground provided by "fairy." *Olive* exploits this debatable ground in order to conduct an investigation into the representation of Christianity and its

¹⁴ Margaret Maison, *Search Your Soul, Eustace: A Survey of the Religious Novel in the Victorian Age* (London: Stag-Sheed, 1961) 219.

¹⁵ Novels of Doubt in the 1840s invariably rewarded their doubting heroes with madness or death, even in the case of sympathetic portrayals such as Geraldine Jewsbury's *Zoë* (1845), or J. A. Froude's *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849). Even in a late religious novel, such as Mrs. Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888), the eponymous hero suffers an untimely death. *Olive*, therefore, in rewarding its doubting cleric with a perfect wife and a successful career in science, is highly innovative. *Olive* is at the vanguard of what, following Maison, we might consider the second phase in the novelistic treatment of religious doubt: as an illness to be cured. See Maison, *Search Your Soul* 212-18.

¹⁶ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1978).

relationship to knowledge and to institute the female angel/artist (the *künstlerroman* and novel of doubt held in tension by the *kunstmärchen*) as the mid-century inheritor of "religious capital" who achieves the redemption of patriarchy. Like Elizabeth Langland's mid-Victorian domestic manager who controls cultural capital, this hybrid creature is the new possessor of religious capital because she has the power of representation.¹⁷ Olive represents Christianity—in herself (a living theodicy) and as an artist/fairy teller.

Both as embodiment and artist, Olive's power of representation does not simply reflect but interrogates Christianity, a function made clear from the very genesis of both the character and the novel. Born at Stirling, the home of national heroes, Olive's deformed body poses the ultimate question, her nurse Elspie (the first of the text's fairy godmothers)¹⁸ wondering over the new-born: "God forgie me—but why did He send

¹⁷ Langland considers that "To say that beginning in the 1830s and 1840s middle-class women controlled significant discursive practices is to argue that they controlled the dissemination of certain knowledges and thus helped to ensure a middle-class hegemony in mid-Victorian England" (9). Langland is using Bourdieu's notion of class as a group defined through cultural representation (6) and sees women as the producers/controllers of such representations: "In this dimension of cultural currency as opposed to economic capital, women dominated Victorian society" (7). Because "controlling the productions of meanings yields cultural capital just as controlling the means of production realizes material capital" the middle-class homemaker was positioned "as a key figure in erecting class barriers, in policing and maintaining borders, in contributing to a rhetoric that 'naturalized' class difference, and in justifying and perpetuating the status quo" (21). Langland believes her emphasis on material practices "provides a way to move beyond both celebrations of middle-class Victorian women as possessed of personal and redemptive power and opposing critiques of those women as invidious apologists for and perpetuators of bourgeois hegemony" (13). Linking representation solely to class-interest is limiting however; I do not consider that the "transcendent" aspects of domestic ideology can be entirely explained as strategies of mystification.

I go back to Bourdieu's associated notion of "religious capital" (in some senses, via Weber's idea of "religious interest," the genesis of concepts of symbolic power and cultural capital), again defined as being accumulated and exercised through the power of representation, and consider women as the new possessors and producers of the same, as demonstrated by the mid-century text. Although at this time "religious capital" is still closely related to "cultural capital" in a way that would eventually cease to be possible following the Darwinian "revolution" of 1859, I want to highlight the need to distinguish these forms of power; a distinction necessary to account for *Olive's* particular delineation and location of its "religious field" in relation to other contemporary arenas. My concept of the "debatable ground" owes something to Bourdieu's "concept of field [which is used] to designate competitive arenas where other forms of capital (e.g., symbolic, cultural, social) as well as economic capital are invested, exchanged, and accumulated." See David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) 44.

¹⁸ Olive's fairy godmothers are also the Theological Virtues: faith, hope and charity; the three (Christian) graces Aglaia (Brilliance), Euphrosyne (Joy), and Thalia (Bloom). Elspie and Sybilla together are Faith or Aglaia (Brilliance), Meliora is Hope and Joy, and Aunt Flora (Bloom) is Charity. These three structure and unify *Olive*, each presiding over a separate stage of Olive's development. All three give Olive gifts that lead to her fairy tale ending—Elspie faith; Meliora hope, specifically a painting career; and Flora a house.

ye into the waefu' world at a'?' It was a question, the nature of which has perplexed theologians, philosophers, and metaphysicians, in every age, and will perplex them all to the end of time" (7). That Olive embodies the answer to the question she poses is prefigured in her mother's dream after which she is named, a vision of a "child-angel— with a green olive-branch in its hand," which leads the significantly named Sybilla through perils to "a beautiful valley," touching her hurts with the olive branch and healing them, and revealing itself at last as her daughter (12).

Olive's prophetic role is akin to that of the Romantic artist, Novalis's author of the "true fairy tale."

She had never even heard of Wordsworth; yet, as she listened to the first cuckoo note, she thought it no bird, but truly "a wandering voice." [...]

She had never heard of Art, yet there was something in the gorgeous sunset that made her bosom thrill; and out of the cloud ranges she tried to form mountains such as there were in Scotland, and palaces of crystal such as she read of in her fairy tales. No human being had ever told her of the mysterious links that reach from the Infinite, out of which, from the buried ashes of dead Superstition, great souls can evoke those two mighty spirits, Faith and Knowledge; yet she went to sleep every night believing that she felt, nay, could almost see, an angel standing at the foot of her little bed, watching her with holy eyes, guarding her with outspread wings.

O Childhood! beautiful dream of unconscious poetry; of purity so pure, that it knew neither the existence of sin nor of its own innocence [...]. Blessed Childhood! [...] hidden therein, lay the germs of a whole life. (38)

Although formally untutored, Olive conjoins a Romantic education through the Book of Nature with the necessary exposure to Christian Revelation, "the faith she had been taught by Elspie," who "coming from the debatable ground between Highlands and

Lowlands, had united to the rigid piety of the latter much wild Gaelic superstition" (27). The faith of the debatable ground, then, is an amalgam of the Romantic and the Evangelical, the heretical and the orthodox, through and with which the "ironic child" must lead the way; luckily Olive's "usual childish games [include] piecing disjointed maps" (45).

As Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher note, of course, all Victorian women were theoretically "ironic children": "if they were good, they never grew up."¹⁹ Olive is the embodiment of this fairy tale "ironic child": "She looked less like a child than a woman dwarfed into childhood" (23). As such, as Showalter notes, her deformity "represents her very womanhood,"²⁰ that is, the Victorian construction of womanhood, the burden of which Olive assumes in a *Pilgrim's Progress*-like journey through "the various phases which compose that strange and touching mystery—a woman's life" (7). Craik's specifically female Christian is both an everywoman and marked by difference, like her famous contemporary in *Jane Eyre*, of which, as Cora Kaplan notes, *Olive* is "both a companion and a countercontext."²¹ In an obvious echo of *Jane Eyre* whose recognition of her heterogeneity is mediated through representations—the "reading" of her specular image in the haunted red-room according to her nurse's tales—Olive is also typed as the denizen of the fairy tale. Olive has "a spectral air," she is "the sort of being renowned in elfin legends, as springing up on a lonely moor, or appearing by a cradle-side; supernatural, yet fraught with a nameless beauty" (23).²² Olive's first ball is the site for the recognition and naming of difference; a rite of passage which should mark

¹⁹ Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher 1.

²⁰ Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* 28.

²¹ Cora Kaplan, introduction, *Olive; and, The Half-Caste*, Oxford Popular Fiction (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) xx.

²² *Jane Eyre* sees herself as "like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie's evening stories represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers [...]." Recollecting her experience the adult Jane recognises that she was "a discord in Gateshead Hall; I was like nobody there [...] a heterogeneous thing [...] a useless thing [...] a noxious thing [...]" (Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Q. D. Leavis [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981]) 46 and 47.

her inclusion within normative femininity in fact signifies her radical otherness, giving her the "first shock of her bitter destiny" (76). Looking toward the Camelot of love and marriage the "curse" comes upon her. As they gaze into a mirror together, Olive's friend Sara (herself representative of normativity as will be discussed below) "helps" her to understand why she "seem[s] different from other girls." Sara, a kind of Wordly-Wiseman, speaks the male gaze; her simultaneous assertion and denial, emphasis and ellipsis, both render such aberrant femininity visible and consign it to the negative realm, to the realm of the unspoken: "it does not signify to me [...]. But perhaps with strangers, especially with men, who think so much of beauty, this defect—. [...] I did not say that it was a positive *deformity*" (67, italics original).

Later, Olive is driven to momentary doubt, feeling herself locked within the specular logic of the Calvinist fairy tale:

She saw in herself a poor deformed being, shut out from all natural ties [...]. How hard seemed her doom! If it were for months only, or even years; but, to bear for a whole life this withering ban—never to be freed from it, except through death! And her lips unconsciously repeated the bitter murmur, "O God! why hast thou made me thus?"

It was scarcely uttered before her heart trembled at its impiety. And then the current of her thoughts changed. Those mysterious yearnings which had haunted her throughout childhood, [...] returned to her now. God's immeasurable Infinite rose before her in glorious serenity. [...] She felt [...] that her poor deformed body enshrined a living soul. A soul that could look on Heaven, and on whom Heaven also looked—not like man, with scorn or loathing, but with a Divine tenderness that had power to lift the mortal into communion with the immortal. (69)

"Fairy" and Olive's "vivid fancy" (69) thus provide the possibilities: for critique and for an alternative to the predestined narrative; the "true fairy tale" is a way to lift

one's gaze from the mirror and into the freedom of Heaven. "Fairy" also provides Craik with the negative pole of her gender critique, although, hijacking Cora Kaplan's phrase, Craik is "writing against the grain of prejudice that informed the work of her more illustrious and better-remembered peers"²³ with her inversion of the valences of monstrous and "ideal" forms as expressed in the relationship of Sybilla Rothesay, the "fairy apparition" (19) to her daughter's "spectral air." Sybilla is "hyper-feminine,"²⁴ the woman as object, "a flesh-and-blood fairy—a Venus de Medici transmuted from the stone" (9). She opposes herself to the monstrous, refusing to name Olive after her Rothesay ancestors, rejecting the tales told by Elspie of the "awful women":

long traditions about the Lady Christina Rothesay, who was a witch, and a great friend of "Maister Michael Scott," and how, with spells, she caused her seven stepsons to pine away and die; also the Lady Isobel, who let her lover down from her bower window with the long strings of her golden hair; and how her brother found and slew him;—whence she laid a curse on all the line who had golden hair, and such never prospered, but died unmarried and young. (11)

Initially Sybilla seems soulless, her lack of maternal feeling for her deformed child near to making a murderer of her. But Sybilla, like her daughter, has been rendered monstrous by the objectification forced on women by ideology: in her case, a restrictive feminine education (16-17). A "curse, a bitter curse, this [Olive's "deformity"] seemed to the young and beautiful creature, who had learned since her birth to consider beauty as the greatest good" (14). With the reawakening of Sybilla's maternal affections, her "face [...] now shining with maternal love, seemed beautiful as an angel's" (44), "The neglected wife—the often ailing mother—dependent on her daughter's happiness, was happier and nearer to heaven than she had ever been in her life" (68). Sybilla is punished with blindness, befitting both her excessive aestheticism

²³ Kaplan xxv. Kaplan is referring to Craik's intervention in mid-century racial discourse.

²⁴ Kaplan xvi.

and her Sibylline nature. Her prophetic dreams at Olive's birth are realised: the child is symbolically and literally mother of the woman²⁵ and at the time of her death the Sibyl is "growing quite an angel—an angel with wings" (203). As Sybilla's dream prophesied, the angel has indeed led the fairy safe "through many troublous ways" (208).

In order to draw her angel-artist Craik must redeem womankind from normative femininity, from the extremes of both the excessively Romantic—Sybilla—and the prosaic—Sara, the heroine of the conduct book. (Although Olive cannot save Sara, she will rescue her daughter from the sterility of the prosaic, see below.) Sara speaks the male gaze, the relativity of women; she is one of "the class from whence are taken the lauded 'mothers, wives, and daughters of England'" (58), for whom Sarah Ellis, the preeminent early Victorian ideologue of domesticity, wrote.²⁶ *Olive* is an early example of Craik's argument with Ellis's "relative creature," a debate most clearly expressed in Craik's own highly successful conduct book, *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* 1858,²⁷ where Craik reworks Ellis's imagery of the fairy order and the angel. A brief analysis of Craik's 1858 reformulation helps clarify *Olive's* use of these motifs in contradicting the secularising tendencies of conduct book femininity.

Craik's weaver of "the fairy Order" is the "happy woman," a direct descendent of Sarah Ellis's earlier "ministering angel" "whose peculiar charm is that of diffusing happiness." The considerate and caring household management Ellis's domestic angel undertakes gives the *impression* that "a fairy order ha[s] been at work." Craik's "fairy Order" expresses truth, demonstrating the links between things, by disentangling "the tangled threads" showing "a clear pattern through the ugly maze," justifying "the ways

²⁵ "[T]he parent and child seemed to change places. [...] This may seem a new theory of maternal and filial bond, but in the world it is frequently so. [...] 'I am as a mother unto my mother'" (106). See Warner chapters 1, 5, and 6 for the place of the Sibyl in fairy tale.

²⁶ *The Women of England* 1838 and sequels *The Daughters of England* 1842, *The Wives of England* and *The Mothers of England* 1843.

²⁷ *A Woman's Thoughts* was still popular in the 1870s. See Robert A. Colby, *Fiction With a Purpose: Major and Minor Nineteenth-Century Novels* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 1968) 347n5.

of Providence" (*A Woman's Thoughts* 187-88). Ellis's "fairy order," on the other hand, is a "fairy story," an artifice. It denies the true links between things. As Elizabeth Langland explains, Ellis's "fairy order" works with "Providence" to mystify mistress/servant relations.²⁸ Although Craik herself evokes Providence in respect to class positioning, she also allows for class mobility (*A Woman's Thoughts* 123). More importantly in this context, Craik emphasises the "one common womanhood" of mistress and servant under Providence (*A Woman's Thoughts* 124) against Ellis's denial of natural ties, "except what necessarily implies authority and subjection,"²⁹ a mercenary reality which the "fairy order" is designed to disguise. Accentuating this difference, in *Olive* the class-based fairy order is rejected,³⁰ and delineated instead as the closest of natural ties, an expression of the "maternal and filial bond" (106). Due to Olive's behind-the-scenes organisation, for example, it seems to Sybilla that "everything arranged itself, as under an invisible fairy hand [...]" (107). Craik's "happy woman" of *A Woman's Thoughts* is the Miltonic poet, justifying the ways of God to men. Moreover, she is synonymous with her text: the metaphorical "fairy Order" embodies order, she is "a living justification of the ways of Providence," a theodicy. Ellis's domestic "angel" is duplicitous, despite the rhetoric of embodiment, "her peculiar charm" seems less that of the Christian body than that of a Duessa, self-consciously manufacturing her artificial "fairy order." Craik's Sara, illustrating Ellis, is "fair and fause, fair and fause" (247), ensnaring Harold Gwynne with "the enchantments of a beautiful woman" (93), whilst speaking of her preexisting

²⁸ Sarah Ellis, *Women of England*, 1838, 202-03, 196. Quoted in Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* 75-76. This ideological motif is also found outside Ellis's texts; Langland notes that Brontë's Rochester prefers to identify Jane Eyre as a fairy rather than as his employee, 76n9.

²⁹ Ellis. Quoted in Langland 76.

³⁰ For a staging and direct rejection of the mystified "fairy order" see *Olive* 160-61. The "sharply observant Christal" dismisses the notion that the wealthy Mrs Fludyer could possibly be the "good fairy" who has prepared their new home.

engagement, "her violated troth," "in a cold, businesslike manner" (95).³¹ Sara's mercenary and duplicitous attitude to love and marriage is punished with an early death.

Craik substitutes a Christian materialism for the mercenary materialism of the conduct book heroine, delineating a spiritual economy that, ironically, incorporates the "world" banished by the conduct book. Ellis's "angel" casts the veil of the "fairy order" to maintain the fiction of the home as a private, feminine sphere, divorced from matters of production. By the 1840s the separation of spheres was either assumed or enforced by domestic ideologues such as Ellis. Craik, however, by showing Olive painting and foregrounding her financial motive for doing so, highlights feminine production in the home and maintains its links with the "public" as well as the domestic economy.³² The disastrous marriage of Angus and Sybilla Rothesay is largely a result of their inhabiting separate spheres and leads to an economic disaster from which only their daughter's domestically based labour can save them; the next generation unite love and labour at Morningside, "a wishful, progressive fantasy of love and work."³³ Whilst recalling Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* in many particulars—Sybilla's superficial education and maternal hostility, Angus's arrogance and tyranny, for example—Craik's

³¹ Conduct Books generally were read by Davidoff and Hall as instrumental in the secularization of Evangelical values (see above, introduction 6-7).

Craik had used "fairy" and its link with artifice to criticise normative femininity in her first novel: "There is a German fairy fable of the Ellevomen, who are all fair in front, but if you walk round them hollow as a piece of stamped leather. Perhaps this is a myth of young-lady-hood" (*The Ogilvies: A Novel* 1849 [London: Walter Scott, n.d.] 166).

³² "And so—though this confession may somewhat lessen the romance of her character—it was from no yearning after fame, no genius-led ambition, but from the mere desire of earning money, that Olive Rothesay first conceived the thought of becoming an artist" (119). This necessary concern for the everyday is one of the things that distinguishes her from a male Romantic.

Ellis wrote that if a woman touches *any* article of trade "she loses caste, and ceases to be a lady" [*Women of England*] quoted in Davidoff and Hall 315. In *A Woman's Thoughts* Craik dismantles the difference between a professional and a "person in business" (92-93).

³³ Sybilla and Angus's marriage is "blighted, not from evil, or even lack of worth in either, but because they did not understand one another. Their current of existence flowed on coldly and evenly, in two parallel lines, which would never, never meet!" (47). Craik also critiques the ideal of masculinity. Angus's desire to be rich leads to his abandonment of Sybilla in the early years of their marriage. Later, their distance causes Angus to devote himself to money (his Bible Adam Smith [48]) and he becomes an obsessive speculator/gambler, eventually it kills him. Craik delineates the unhappy marriage in the opening of ch. 10. Craik inverts the usual portrayal of separate spheres, showing how they part men and women, not unite them. Olive is herself androgynous: "the strong will and decision of a man, united to the tenderness of a woman" (52).

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delineation of "a REVOLUTION in female [and male] manners" is grounded in a Christian materialism.³⁴

According to Oliphant, however, it was not Wollstonecraft but "the invasion of *Jane Eyre*" that had resulted in the "most alarming revolution of modern times."³⁵ Craik's reinscription of *Jane Eyre* has some similarities to Oliphant's parodic rendition of the sensation novel: a recuperation of both the female text and the female reader, an intention acknowledged by contemporaries.³⁶ Craik's soteriology demands the heroine be freed from the shackles of normative femininity; Brontë's Byronic female, however, is rejected. Craik's murder of the artificial Ellisian "angel" and her conversion of the Sibyl together allow her to resurrect a purified form of the "heroine in white muslin, the immaculate creature who was of sweetness and goodness all compact, [who] had lasted in the common lines of fiction up to [the] time" of *Jane Eyre* in 1847, and to whom *Jane Eyre* had given, "for the moment, the *coup de grace*."³⁷ Through "fairy" Craik transmogrifies the *Quarterly Review*'s "personification of an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit"³⁸—Jane—into "a visible angel of peace" (193)—

³⁴ Showalter points out that few Victorians read Wollstonecraft; her life was regarded as scandalous (*A Literature of Their Own* 18). As an intertext, however, Wollstonecraft's gender critique gained influence; Anne K. Mellors, for example, cites Susan Ferrier's *Marriage* as a fictionalised *Vindication*. See *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 49-52. See also n35 below.

³⁵ *Jane Eyre*'s "furious love-making was but a wild declaration of the 'Rights of Woman' in a new aspect." See Oliphant, "Modern Novelists—Great and Small," *Blackwood's* 77 (May 1855) 557. Years later, in her *The Literary History of England in the End of the Eighteenth and Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, 3 volumes (London: Macmillan, 1882), Oliphant defended Mary Wollstonecraft: her "plea for women is of the mildest description. She vindicates their right to be considered as human creatures" (2:251), she is *not* "a female atheist and libertine, an offence to God and men" (2:252); the fortunes of her reputation provide "a curious lesson over again of the cruelty of general report and the violence of prejudice" (2:253).

³⁶ While the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1853 described Brontë's novels as "unwomanly. [...] Of [Craik] no complaint can be made similar to that [...] just uttered; all she writes is not merely pure, but purifying." It did, however, concede Brontë was the better novelist. See "The Lady Novelists of Great Britain," *Gentleman's Magazine* 40 ns (July 1853) 21.

³⁷ Oliphant, et al, *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign: A Book of Appreciations*, (1897, N.p.: Folcroft, 1969) 17.

³⁸ Elizabeth Rigby, *Quarterly Review* 84 (Dec. 1848): 173-74. Quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979, New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 337. Craik transposes Rigby's summary of the proud and ungrateful nature of Jane, her rebellious espousal of "rights" rather than Providence, onto Christal, who is literally Olive's illegitimate double.

Olive. Although Olive paints the Romantic female rebel (Cythna in Shelley's 1818 *The Revolt of Islam* [123-24]), and shares Jane's feelings of "silent revolt against [...her] lot,"³⁹ she immediately quashes such feelings as "impious" (e.g. 69, 96). While the child Jane cannot obey the demand for "perfect submission and stillness" that would liberate her from the haunted red-room, Olive is "unlike a child, in whom are the springs of anger and revenge," having preternaturally learnt "to suffer and be silent" (27). Paradoxically, then, Jane "Rechristianized," refeminized, avoiding "complaint," is released from confinement.⁴⁰

Craik gives Olive Jane's desire for "more vivid kinds of goodness," for "action." While Olive begs admittance and apologises for trespassing in realms guarded by patriarchy (here art and religion, see below), rather than railing she wins through her own efforts (126) "exercise for [...her] faculties, and a field for [...her] efforts as [...her] brothers" have. Becoming a governess is written out of the realm of possibility (Olive's chance of a fulfilling career is ironically furthered by her lack of education), and Jane's artistic dabblings become with Olive a fully-fledged professional career.

The novel is "pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. [...] The tone of mind and thought which has fostered Chartism and rebellion is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*" (Elizabeth Rigby, *Quarterly Review* 84 [Dec. 1848]: 173-74).

³⁹ The *Jane Eyre* quotations are from Jane's famous feminist outcry that opens chapter 12 (141).

⁴⁰ In an episode designed to be read against Jane's red-room experience (and the death of Helen Burns) Craik begins her reassertion of the equation of faith and freedom. Alone in bed with her dying nurse the child Olive is beset with "awful thoughts of death and the grave," "children's fancies about 'ghosts' and boggy." These terrors, significantly occurring in a passage, lead her to God; unlike Jane shut in the red-room who attempts to maintain silence, "fearful lest any sign of violent grief might waken a preternatural voice to comfort me, or elicit from the gloom some haloed face, bending over me with strange pity" (*Jane Eyre* 48), Olive recites the Lord's Prayer. From her experience of increasing strength as she reiterates "*Deliver us from evil*," she learns "that mighty faith 'which can move mountains'; that fervent boldness of prayer with the very utterance of which an answer comes." By reciting her magic incantation, the boggy is transformed into "the Angel of that child, [...] beside her [...] teach[ing] her in faint shadowings the mysteries of her life to come" (40-42). Jane's anticipation of the spirit of Mr. Reed, on the other hand, is an "idea, consolatory in theory, [that] I felt would be terrible if realized," and results in "a species of fit" when she believes she hears "the rushing of wings" (50, 49). *Rasselas*, the pious Helen Burns's favoured reading rejected by Jane as dull, forms the landscape of Olive, i.e. the Braid Hills (255).

Even Christal Manners—the counterpart of Adèle (in her parentage and Parisian style), Bertha Mason (in her murderous attempt on Olive), and also, in her failure "to wrestle with an angry spirit" (184) the child Jane—will be released from "the quiet silent home [a convent] which she had chosen as her spirit's grave," into "the peace of a useful life, spent, not in barren solitude, but in the fruitful garden of God's world" (329). Even within an "almost [...] demon" (288) lurks the possibility of "a lingering angel" (292); Christal Manners will enter the crystal palaces of fairy and behold the crystal rivers of Revelation.

What initially reads as an apology for her femininity and a properly passive approach—"Woman as I am, I will dare all things—endure all things. Let me be an artist!" (125)—can, of course, equally be read as a declarative statement, for Olive is "a woman [...] at once gentle and strong, meek and fearless, patient to endure, heroic to act" (100). Olive's body signifies this radical ambivalence, identified by Poovey as a quintessential female Romantic literary strategy of accommodation, "a code capable of being read in two ways: as acquiescence to the norm and as departure from it [...]."⁴¹ Olive's "deformity"—which at once condenses and displaces femininity (see above, 142-43)—allows her to transcend the constraints of gender, essentially limitations of form: "That sense of personal imperfection which she deemed excluded her from a woman's natural destiny, gave her freedom in her own" (127). She uses her "difference" to claim the female artist as heroic exile: "I, too, am one of these outcast; give me then this inner life which is beyond all!" (125).⁴² Art is also one of Olive's "duties" (301), and it is through prosecuting this liberatory obligation that she will redeem patriarchy.

Craik establishes her angel-artist as heir to the male romantic artist. Like Olive, the painter Michael Vanbrugh is cursed with physical imperfection. He is also Olive's masculine Other in that he too is linked to the angelic. Michael models himself on Michelangelo Buonarrotti (112), the archetypal artistic genius,⁴³ "the one among [us artists] who was himself above humanity, Michael the Angel!" (124). But unlike

⁴¹ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) 41.

⁴² Such otherness is crucial, because Olive's "poor deformed body" frees her from the constraints of femininity, allowing her the necessary Romantic individualism: "a being—isolated, yet strong in her isolation; who mingles, and must mingle, among men, not as a woman, but as one who, like themselves, pursues her own calling, has her own spirit's aim [...]" (127). Dorothy Mermin writes that for women writers "Byronism [...] was a psychological impulsion to be cherished and an artistic problem they had to resolve" (*Godiva's Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880*, Women of Letters [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993] 11), the rebel was contrary to proper femininity, even as Byron himself defined it. The trope of deformity in itself links Olive to Byron, who had a club-foot.

⁴³ Michelangelo was favoured by the Romantics and was instituted as the type of artistic genius by such influential texts as Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*. Craik's Vanbrugh, despite his isolation and lack of sales, is in many ways representative of the mainstream Academic tradition (as Meliora's fantasy of Michael as the President of the Royal Academy indicates), moulded after Reynolds's recommendations—promoting study of the great masters and reverence of the lonely genius-artist.

Olive, Vanbrugh's monstrosity links him to the demonic: he is an "ogre," "an ascetic and a misanthrope" (153, 116); he is a creature of the Calvinist fairy tale, a "gigantic warrior, guarding the shrine of Art" (121) from women:

"I said that it was impossible for a woman to become an artist—I mean, a *great* artist. [...] Not only a painter, but a poet; a man of learning, of reading, of observation. A gentleman [...]. A man of high virtue, or how can he reach the pure ideal? A man of iron will, unconquered daring, and passions strong—yet stainless. Last and greatest, a man who, feeling within him the divine spirit, with his whole soul worships God!" (124, italics original)

But the patriarchal archangel has overreached himself. Michael "looked on all beautiful forms of nature as only made to be painted," and vows to "out-do Providence; I, with my hand, will continually create beauty" (112). He believes the male advantage in art is that men, as the narrator reminds us, "can trample on all human ties" whereas women are bound by "the heart and affections [...] with everlasting links" (126). As the narrative and imagery make clear, however, it is the violence of the Romantic gaze that imprisons women by fashioning them in its image. Michael paints Olive "in the painful attitude of a 'Cassandra raving'" (113), Sybilla as *Alcestis* (who literally sacrificed her life for her husband) and Olive as her grieving mother. He proposes marriage so that he can take Olive to Rome (significantly on the proceeds of the sale of *Alcestis*), his "design" to "make of [Olive] such an artist as no woman ever was before," she will be to him "like a child" (157-58). While entering into such a child-like/marital relationship with the patriarch would be in keeping with a typical nineteenth-century female artist's professional development, it also demonstrates the Romantic specularity noted by Anne Mellors.⁴⁴ Olive rejects such patriarchal reproduction. She refuses

⁴⁴ Victorian women artists were often trained like sons to work in the family business; as adults they often married another artist. See Deborah Cherry, "Family Business," *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London: Routledge, 1993) 19-44. Mellors notes the "fundamental desire of the romantic lover: to find in female form a mirror image of himself, a soul within his soul or second self [...]" (Mellors 25), the romantic poet "ignores [the female beloved's] human otherness in order to

Michael, holding that to marry without love would be "a heavy sin" (159); that the wages of such a sin might literally be death is suggested by the demise of Michael's sister, "the beneficent little fairy" Meliora (137), who had accompanied her brother to Rome.

The death of Meliora is an indictment of male Romanticism: "[...] Vanbrugh was a man to whom Fortune could never come. He must have hunted her from him all his life, with his pride, his waywardness, his fitful, morose ambition. [...In Rome] the painter dreamed his dream, the little sister stayed at home and starved" (304). If Michael had not rejected the domestic, had not crushed "the ties of kindred" (157), he could have appreciated the Fortune that was already with him, his devoted and self-sacrificing sister Meliora.⁴⁵ Meliora is Olive's second fairy godmother: "the most hopeful little body in the world," "Wherever she went, she always brought 'better things'—at least, in anticipation" (117). Meliora is another fairy tale narrator: of "consolatory proverbs" and of artistic mythology, telling "all the stories of little peasant-boys who have [...] risen [through art] to be the companions of kings [...]" (117). As Susan Casteras explains, the myth of origin was part of the Victorian "cult of male genius," and was represented as a principally male transaction—between "boy wonders" and "older, protective males"—wherein "the female is backgrounded and her impact displaced onto the feminized boy geniuses whom she has helped to nurture."⁴⁶ In a sleight-of-hand typical of both Craik and the fairy tale itself,⁴⁷ Meliora simultaneously inhabits this male myth and, partly through the manipulation of its conventions, is herself instrumental in creating a new female myth of origin. From her

impose his own metaphors, his own identity, upon her, to render her but a clone [...] of himself" (Mellors 27).

⁴⁵ Whose "indigent father's anticipation of a bequeathed fortune had caused her rather eccentric christian name" (116).

⁴⁶ Susan Casteras, "Excluding Women: The Cult of the Male Genius in Victorian Painting," *Rewriting the Victorians: Theory, History, and the Politics of Gender*, ed. Linda M. Shires (New York: Routledge, 1992) 139 and 143.

⁴⁷ Warner writes that "Within the stories themselves, the narrator frequently accedes symbolically to the story in the person of the fairy godmother" (Warner 215).

position in the background Meliora foregrounds the female artist, telling tales of the female artistic tradition (118) and acting as "Cinderella's godmother" to Olive's painting career. She shows Olive's work to Michael (which leads to Olive's tutelage by Vanbrugh) and effectively arranges her first sale (ostensibly "'managed'" by him, 137). In a neat inversion of the myth of origin, Olive is effectively a "masculinized girl genius," Michael conceding that "though you are a woman, you have a man's soul—the soul of genius" (157).

In this new female myth of origin both body and soul are acknowledged. Meliora embodies the true "fairy order" in the domestic and the artistic spheres, demonstrating that matters of production are not opposed, as Michael (and Mrs Ellis) would have it, to the creation of the artistic "fairyland" (125). Whereas Vanbrugh paints "grand pictures, which nobody bought" (112), making his only sales to the traditional upper class market (an English nobleman and a Roman cardinal), Olive represents the nineteenth-century trend away from classical and towards English literary sources and domestic subjects, subjects that appealed to the growing middle-class market, who were often with little or no classical education and indifferent to such themes (as the "domesticisation" of Olive's *Charity* demonstrates, 141).⁴⁸ What Michael dismisses as the "paltry gold" that "women always think of" (144) is revealed as a veritable fairy currency: "elfin coins," "a Danaë-stream [poured] into Olive's lap" by "the beneficent little fairy [...] Cinderella's godmother" (137-38). This is Olive's annunciation, confirming her inheritance of the power of representation.

Olive worries that such fortune might be false, that "elfin coins [...] change into withered leaves." Within the true fairy order, however, these "'bits of shining gold'" are the (Sybilline) leaves on which Christian destiny is written, heralding the female angel-artist as the saviour of her race (137-38). The money enables Olive to fulfil her

⁴⁸ See Richard D. Altick, *Paintings From Books: Arts and Literature in Britain, 1760-1900* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1985) ch. 5 passim.

Olive's juvenilia includes "original pencil designs, ludicrously voluminous, illustrating nearly every poet, living or dead" (121), specialising, it seems, in British literary figures: Milton, "Scott, Byron, Moore, and Coleridge" (56), for instance. The work we "see" is an illustration of Shelley's *Revolt of Islam* (123-24).

"holy purpose" (120), that is, to "redeem" her dead "father's honour" (138) by paying his debts. Later, responding to a posthumous request "to stand between her father and his sin" (273), Olive must find and care for Christal Manners, his illegitimate daughter. (Craik represents this commission as part of the true "fairy Order": "threads of guidance, first unseen and then distinctly traced, forcing on the mind that sweet sense of invisible ministry which soothes all suffering, and causes a childlike rest on the Omnipotence which out of all evil continually evolves good" [275].) Olive's "holy work" is to "Atone [his] sin!", to take up this "cross" (275) of patriarchal/paternal failure. As her name suggests Christal Manners, like Sybilla, is the product of a Rousseauesque education. Her "Parisian feet" cannot manage "the hateful labyrinths of the muddy road" (167).

While Olive thus embraces self-denial, to "feel less of an artist and more of a woman" (185) does not, in fact, result in her martyrdom, but is rather an escape from male Romanticism's materialisation of women and the total self-abnegation it demands of them. Michael's idolatrous attitude to forms effectively "reduced the womenkind about him to the condition of perfect slaves" (156).⁴⁹ The female Christian artist is juxtaposed with the male genius as pagan, as violent idolater; Michael feels "like Parrhasius of old, who exulted in his captive's dying throes, since upon them his hand of genius would confer immortality" (125). His neglect of "paltry gold" ensures that, with respect to Meliora, and the model for his *Cleopatra*, Celia Manners, mother of Christal,⁵⁰ this becomes horribly and literally true. At the time of *Olive's* writing the dyad of idolatry and female abjection was associated with Roman Catholicism, and by

⁴⁹ Rousseau's eighteenth-century prescription for female education based itself on the notion that "the whole education of women ought to be relative to men" (*Émile* 1762). Mellors writes that "Together, Burke, Rousseau and Byron define the hegemonic domestic ideology of the Romantic period: the construction of the ideal woman solely as daughter, lover, wife and mother, one who exists only to serve the interests of male children and adults, and whose value is equated with her beauty, submissiveness, tenderness and affection" (Mellors 109).

Michael looks on his *Alcestis*, "waiting for death to call her from her kingdom and her lord" with "the gaze of a parent on his child, a lover on his mistress, an idolater on his self-created god" (146).

⁵⁰ "She seems to be slowly dying, and I shouldn't wonder if it were of sheer starvation; those models earn so little. Yesterday she fainted as she stood—Michael is so thoughtless" (129).

extension the Oxford Movement. Sybilla may well be "happy to think my child is safe with me, and not carried off to Rome" (185).⁵¹ Eschewing "the City of Art" (157) recoups feminine suffering for the true City of God, where the female artist may live and thrive; as already noted, "to endure" is the prerogative of the artist as much as the loving woman. Olive's rejection of the "painful attitude" of Cassandra allows her to rise "from the ashes of dead superstition" as Cinderella, Florence Nightingale's "Saviour of her race,"⁵² the new possessor of religious capital.

In part, then, fairy's debatable ground is a mid-century strategy, a way to include the Romantic and feminine with the Evangelical stress on Scripture and individual judgement, whilst avoiding associations with Ritualism/Popery. Or, as Harold Gwynne puts it, a way of allowing Olive to speak both "graceful—poetical" religion (165) that is also "plain reasonable words—not like the vain babblers of perverted creeds" (211). Fulfilling the promise of her childhood Olive has effectively become Vanbrugh's "great artist"; she is now "Not only a painter, but a poet," sharing with the now blind Sybilla "vivid pictures painted by Olive's eloquent tongue" (160). As a successful artist, the possessor of religious capital, the "ironic child" is now ready to yield the fairy to heaven and debate with the doubting clergyman, Harold Gwynne—"our evil genius—our *Daimon!*" (147)—and, with her body and her text, to replace the "wornout forms of religion." Entering this "new era" (162) Olive and her mother have been "fairy-guided" to the significantly modern house at Harbury, symbolically decorated by the "same guiding fairy" (160) with emblems of the "debatable ground": prints of the *Raising of Lazarus* and views of Scotland.

⁵¹ Craik's liberalism does not prevent her utilising contemporary Anti-Catholic discourse, although here she feminizes the "natural" family's opposition to the Catholic religious structure. For a classic statement of the perceived threat to the patriarchal family, see above, introduction 21n39. Christal is a secret Roman Catholic, her self-immurement in a convent an expression of self-loathing; at the end of the novel it is suggested this artificial sisterhood will be replaced by biological sisterhood.

Michael worships in the Sistine Chapel, albeit at the shrine of "Michael the Angel" rather than Popery as such. With Michael's burial in Rome, his "only bride" Art (125), and the purchase of his last work by "the Cardinal F--" (305), Craik suggests the end result of Romantic idolatry is Romanism.

⁵² In *Cassandra* Nightingale looked to the advent of a female Christ. See *Cassandra and other Selections from Suggestions for Thought*, ed. Mary Poovey, Pickering Women's Classics (London: Pickering, 1991) 227.

Harold Gwynne, as not only a doubter, but a doubting clergyman, and a scientist to boot, is by definition linked with the monstrous, "an infidel!", "Satan" (195), a "wizard or a magician" (143). Maisie considers that "Mrs. Craik does not trouble to tell us the cause of Harold's doubts," "emphasizing the spiritual agony as much as possible, without reference to its origins."⁵³ In fact Craik highlights the role of knowledge, of theology; Harold is a Faustian/Carlylean figure, a Victorian doubting everyman whose very desire for truth has led him into scepticism (199). Like Teufelsdröckh, Harold's search for knowledge leads him to the university, then to romance, and eventually to the "Infinite." Craik's university (Cambridge) is less *Sartor*'s purveyor of eighteenth-century scepticism however, than of "a thousand petty veils of cunning forms and blindly-taught precedents," the base from which "vile men [preach] virtue—men with weak, uncomprehending brains [...] expound the mighty mysteries of God [...]" (197). This inversion of Carlyle allows Craik to participate in the debate over inadequate theological education and the reform of the Universities (see above, introduction 11n12), alleging that such a situation was productive of doubt: "doubts came upon my mind," says Harold, "as they will upon most young minds whose strivings after truth are hedged in by a thorny rampart of old, worn-out forms" (197). Although Harold is thus victim of a modern dilemma, he is also personally culpable. His desire for education leads him into orders (87), financial considerations (firstly his mother, then Sara) keep him there. This Faustian pact brings its (self-inflicted) "curse" (198). Lacking vocation his vows *themselves* lead him into infidelity (197); lacking true love his marriage to Sara leads him into misogyny. Harold must be rescued from male Romanticism; where Carlyle leaves his hero, with Natural Supernaturalism, is where Craik begins her rescue work.⁵⁴ Although Harold has made his own way from Atheism (319) to Deism, believing in "the one ruling Spirit of the universe—unknown, unapproachable," this leaves him still trapped in the Carlylean

⁵³ Maisie *Search Your Soul* 219.

⁵⁴ Craik's revision of Carlyle perhaps helps account for his irritable "Mulochs [sic], and Brontës, and THINGS of that sort" (J. W. Carlyle, "To Mrs Oliphant," 1862 *Autobiography and Letters of Mrs Margaret Oliphant* 186).

Centre of Indifference where there is no fear or hope and "God, Heaven, Immortality—are [...] meaningless words" (196). Harold is effectively trapped in the past: his compromise is that of the eighteenth century, his preaching "a plain moral discourse—an essay such as Locke or Bacon might have written" (170). He is also, like Sara, trapped in the prosaic; without specifically Christian truth, there can be no poetry, no new clothes, only plain discourses and meaningless words.

The "poetical" is (literally) crucial to the new dispensation. While Michael, as the Romantic artist who travels to Rome, overstates the importance of form, Harold, the Romantic doubter, bearer of the Protestant spirit "who must find out the truth for myself" (222), understates it. Christian forms are not all to be discarded as so many old clothes. Revelation is the Christian idea rendered as forms, the mysterious link between body and text, the incarnation. While "the true hell [...] is that of the conscience and the soul," "not the place of flames and torments of which [...] divines prate" (196), and the Old Testament bears the impress of the minds that wrote it, the Gospels do not (222). Harold must be returned from "the Infinite Unknown, into whose mysteries the mightiest philosophers may pierce and find no end," to "the God mercifully revealed, 'Our Father which is in heaven'—He to whom the poor, the sorrowing, and the ignorant may look, and not be afraid" (193). To guide Harold through "the wild labyrinth" (227), the angel-artist uses the religion of "the debatable ground," "a faith that taught the peace of resting childlike beneath the shadow of that Omnipotent Will, which holds every tangled thread of fate within one mighty Hand, which rules all things, and rules them continually for good" (96).

To the "ironic" clergyman, however, a "debatable ground" means a questionable one: "Can one love Him," asks Harold, "when one does not fully know?" (187). Paradoxically, Harold prevents his young daughter, Ailie, from "resting childlike," by keeping her in "perfect ignorance of the first principles of Christianity" (165), "deem[ing] it inexpedient that the feeble mind of a child should be led to dwell on subjects which are beyond the grasp of the profoundest philosopher" (165). The

consequent debate between the "ironic child" and the "ironic" clergyman over the child's education is central to Craik's exploration of the politics and poetics of religious literacy.

The debate begins when Harold overhears Olive's attempt to explain death and immortality to the child who is playing on her mother's grave. While acknowledging "the great beauty of a woman's religion" and that Olive's "way of putting the case was graceful—poetical," this is said in a "half-sarcastic, half-earnest way" (165). The clergyman upholds the patriarchal prerogative: "a father is the best guide of his child's faith!"⁵⁵ Olive, the Sunday-school teacher, knows she is standing on questionable ground, apologising "for speaking so freely" of theology to "a clergyman—in this place too" (166).

But Olive continues the debate at a later date, contending that: "You hid from her [Ailie] the true faith; she will soon make to herself a false one." Harold responds:

"Nay, what is more false than the idle traditions taught by ranting parents to their offspring—the Bible travestied into a nursery tale—heaven transformed into a pretty pleasure-house—and hell and its horrors brought to frighten children in the dark. Do you think I would have my child turned into a baby saint, to patter glibly over parrot-like prayers, to exchange pet sweetmeats for missionary pennies, and so learn to keep up a debtor and creditor account with Heaven? [...] I would rather see her grow up a heathen."

[...] "But [...] would you have her die as she is now, utterly ignorant of all holy things?"

"Would I have her die an infant bigot—prattling blindly of subjects which in the common course of nature no child can comprehend? Would I have her chronicled in some penny tract as a 'remarkable instance of infant piety,' a small 'vessel of mercy,' to whom the Gospel was revealed at three years old?" (188)

⁵⁵ This is perhaps another instance of Anti-Catholic discourse: an allusion to the "Papist" despotism that was also felt to inform the Oxford Movement's Doctrine of Reserve, and that women were believed to be particular targets of.

The debate is an allegorical set-piece, concentrating Craik's theological, social and political explorations into the opposed figures of the Sunday-school teacher and the clergyman and their disputatious discourse itself, a rehearsal of the eighteenth-century debates over children's education, exploiting the complex political history of fairy and its polysemous nature.

To some degree Olive inverts the accepted gendered valences of the debate, aligning herself with "that clear demonstration of reason which forces conviction" (199) yet, ultimately, revalorizing the "idle traditions" and the "nursery-tale." To Harold these are figures for falsity with which he satirises the extremes of Evangelical child-rearing (which he is, ironically, guilty of himself. Ailie suffers the superficial observation of forms, forced to keep an Evangelical Sunday without the Christianity [172]). By extension, Evangelicalism itself is accused of parody. Olive is also aware of the "frightful profanities of that cant knowledge which young or ignorant minds acquire, and by which the solemn, almost fathomless mysteries of Christianity are lowered to a burlesque" (186).

Craik is aware of the potential disapproval and/or ridicule that could greet religious fiction, in particular that written by women,⁵⁶ and the Evangelical child is also a satirical figure for "woman's religion," another version of Maurice's education-starved "lady theologian" who will thus "make to herself a false" religion.⁵⁷ Craik

⁵⁶ For disapproval, see, for example, W. Y. Sellar, "Religious Novels" *North British Review* 26.51 (Nov. 1856) 216:

Those who have most earnestly studied disputed questions of doctrine and philosophy, who have felt the serious duty of rightly and honestly using their reason in the pursuit of truth, who have learned to despise sophistry and rhetoric on moral as well as intellectual grounds, would not, even had they the power, condescend either to trifle in this way with their deepest convictions, or to take advantage of the idle hours and weaker susceptibilities of their readers.

For ridicule, see George Eliot's delineation of the "most pitiable of all silly novels by lady novelists [...] what we may call the *oracular* species—novels intended to expound the writer's religious, philosophical, or moral theories" in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," *Westminster Review* (Oct. 1856), *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, eds. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (London: Penguin, 1990) 148, italics original.

⁵⁷ See also Maurice's dismissive comment: "Pretty pieces of mosaic, indeed, are the systems of lady theologians" (F. D. Maurice, 1828 *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice: Chiefly Told in His Own Letters*, ed. Frederick Maurice. Vol. 1 [London: Macmillan, 1884] 86).

distances her own text from traditional female religious genres: here the "penny tract" is burlesqued, elsewhere she parodies the domestic allegory.⁵⁸

Simultaneously, however, the patriarch's ambivalent, ironic attitude to "'women's religion'" is being routed, the Sunday-school teacher beginning the process of converting the cleric. The "debatable ground"—of "nursery tales," of a child's religious education—is a woman's "place." Being outside the church, in the graveyard, Olive is breaking no Pauline injunction, and as Harold himself points out, what better place to discuss death and immortality (166).

It is the site of another death, that of the keeper's young son, that precipitates Harold's confession of his doubt and confirms Olive's position and that of "nursery tales." In the keeper's woodland cottage "strong bold men, who feared none of the evils of life, became as feeble as children before the awful power of Death." Like babies before their mother/nurse, "man" is left "poor, weak, and naked before his God" (191). Only the angel can show the way in the face of death; the clergyman, like the Romantic artist, is himself allied with death. While the painter killed "embodied hope," the doubting cleric's specifically masculine rejection of "human affections" is accompanied by his violent (albeit accidental) crushing of an autumnal butterfly, an image equally rich in analogical associations (228). Like Vanbrugh Harold enforces confinement on the powerless. Both Ailie with her "utterly untaught mind" (164) and the keeper John Dent with his accusal—"I know naught about Him, parson—ye never larned me" (192)—have been condemned by Harold to religious illiteracy. Harold, in so disenfranchising women and the working-class, is guilty of the ultimate abuse of power, rendering subjects powerless in the face of death. Harold preaches submission to Providence, typing God as a judge and legislator (192). Again, such subjection is revealed to be wrong.

Harold is himself religiously illiterate, reduced to asking Olive for guidance (191); even then he cannot speak on "'God—heaven—immortality'" (192). As Harold

⁵⁸ Craik is satirising the complacency of middle-class religion, the purchaser of Olive's *Charity* wishing it to double as a family portrait (141).

has already, unwittingly, prophesied, Olive is "a far better apostle than the clergyman" (189). The "good woman" (192) is confirmed as the possessor of religious capital, rightfully usurping the abusive cleric: "now the sceptre seemed torn from his hand—he was a king no more" (194). Olive herself soothes the savage breast of the half-naked "sturdy woodsman, [...] almost giant-like in height and bulk" (190), who, half-crazed with grief for his dead son, prompts another man to consider "the devil's got un" (191). In exorcising Dent's violent potential Olive, "a visible angel of peace" (193), is filling the social role previously administered by male clergy, unifying and reconciling the classes. This is achieved not through submission to oppression, but through subjection to a loving father: "the God mercifully revealed, 'Our Father which is in heaven'—He to whom the poor, the sorrowing, and the ignorant may look, and not be afraid" (193). It is in promoting Christian submission that Red Riding Hood overcomes the satanic wolves. Firstly Dent is disarmed of his murderous attitude towards the bedridden grandmother; then, on the walk home through the forest, Harold at last reveals himself as a heathen in clerical clothing, but is also managed by Olive's passive agency:

there came to Olive, in the place of fear, a strong compassion, tender as strong, and pure as tender. Angel-like, it arose in her heart, ready to pierce his darkness with its shining eyes—to fold around him and all his misery its sheltering wings. He was a great and learned man, and she a lowly woman: in her knowledge not worthy to touch his garment's hem—in her faith able to watch him as from Heaven. (194)⁵⁹

⁵⁹ In Jane Eyre's adult dream of the red-room, the "light that long ago had struck me into syncope" becomes the moonlike goddess figure "Mother," warning Jane away from temptation and confirming her flight from Rochester (*Jane Eyre* 346). In the "night when one might faintly dream what the world would be, if the infidel's boast were true, and *there were no God*" (193, italics original) Olive's moon rises strongly against heterodoxy: "lifting itself out of the horizon's black nothingness [...] like an immortal soul" (198), forming a counterpart to Olive's angel-like compassion, and beneath which Olive girds herself for the saving of Harold's soul (199-200). Both the moon and angel images have the neuter pronoun; the effect in the latter image at least is to transcend the constraints of gender.

Olive has demonstrated that such subjects as death and immortality are "not beyond the reverent faith of a meek Christian," and that "while the intellect comprehends, the heart, or rather the instinct of the soul, is the only fountain of belief. Without that, could a man dive into the infinite until he became as an angel in power?—could he 'by searching find out God?'—still he could not believe" (165). Olive is not, in fact, deficient in knowledge, and resolves to save Harold Gwynne's soul "not with the religion of precedent—not even with the religion of feeling—but by means of that clear demonstration of reason which forces conviction" (199). Olive's "great argument" as reported by Harold, is that "there must be a boundary where all human reasoning fails, and we can trust to nothing but that inward inexplicable sense which we call faith."⁶⁰ This "spiritual sense that may even transcend knowledge" is that of the poet, and one of Olive's attributes (221). In "the pure, beautiful life of a Christian woman" (220) one gains the Romantic immediate beholding, an immediate apprehension of "the one great Truth" uncluttered by "a thousand petty veils of cunning forms and blindly-taught precedents" (197). This encounter is longed for by Harold: "Perchance in the desert I might have learned to serve God. Face to face with Him I might have worshipped his revealings" (197); with Olive he is "as a man who in the desert comes face to face with an angel" (166). While the female body begs the question of the relationship between form and essence,⁶¹ the Christian woman's life closes the gap between form and essence, negating their perceived opposition:

⁶⁰ Sara Putzell presents Neo-Platonism as a solution to the perceived opposition of Byronic Romanticism and Calvinism in *Jane Eyre*, explaining how the Neo-Platonic view of reason as the spark of the divine in humanity—one's essential identity—means that it is a spiritual duty to realise one's rational self. Self-fulfilment is thus inherently Christian. Craik was clearly prey to similar influences, from Maurice in particular, and *Olive* also represents self-fulfilment as a spiritual duty, one in harmony, however, with feminine duties. *Olive*, moreover, has an equivocal attitude toward reason. See Sara Moore Putzell, "Rights, Reason, and Redemption: Charlotte Brontë's Neo-Platonism," *Victorian Newsletter* (Spring 1979).

⁶¹ Women's bodies are the sites of Christian knowledge throughout the text. It is over the dead bodies of Sara, and Sybilla, literally, that Christian knowledge is approached. Celia Manners, the artist's model, is Sybilla's illicit, "dark" counterpart, Angus Rothesay's Quadroon mistress. She is yet another Sibyl, a "Pythoness" (131); linked with the Queen of Sheba through the trope of the "Eastern queen"; (See Warner ch. 7 on Sheba as another fairy narrator and her link with the monstrous). Her Sybilline message lies in her form which "reminded Olive of the reclining figure in the group of the 'Three Fates'" (130). "Olive, prone to romance-weaving, wondered whether nature had in a mere freak invested an ordinary low-born woman with the form of the ancient queens of the world, or whether within that grand body lay ruined an equally grand soul" (130).

"Sometimes I tried to read [...] the morality of Jesus [...] and it struck me how nearly you approached to that divine life which I had thought impossible to be realized," writes Harold to Olive (220). Clearly Harold would be better to Close his *Sartor*, and Open his *Cinderella*, for out of the "ashes of dead Superstition" rises Cinderella/Olive, the figure who incorporates faith and knowledge. Like the "fairy Order" Olive is an embodied theodicy, her revelation, continues Harold, conveyed "less in words than by your holy life"; "The silent teaching of your own life" "has solved to me many of those enigmas of Providence which in my blindness I thought impugned the justice of God" (223).

The "silent voice of a Christian's life" (201), however, also has a textual manifestation, albeit in a strangely labyrinthine manner. Chapter 34 is a condensed version of the text's theology, written in epistolary format. Only Harold's letters are cited, however, despite the fact that the chapter outlines Olive's creed. Craik repeatedly reminds *her* reader that Harold is quoting from Olive's letters to him, repeating Olive's theology back to her (see esp. bottom 222). In part this literary tactic is a strange subterfuge to get the male to speak the female text, thus validating it. Having Harold Gwynne as narrator allows Craik to have a woman's theology not only spoken by a male voice, but "written" by a clergyman (albeit an infidel!). By using the epistolary form, however, and reiteration and indirect reportage, Craik foregrounds Olive's theology *as a text*, effectively setting it alongside the other texts in Harold's theological library; the library is another, specifically textual, figure of the "debatable ground": "a vast mass of polemical literature, orthodox and heterodox, including all faiths, all variations of sect. Mahomet and Swedenborg, Calvin and the Talmud, lay side by side; and on the farthest shelf was the great original of all creeds—the Book of Books" (89). The clergyman is thus learning from the Sunday-school teacher's text and Craik concludes the chapter with a carefully ungendered apologia that nonetheless accentuates the validity of women's theology:

Following whither our subject led, we have gone far beyond the bounds usually prescribed to a book like this. After perusing the present chapter, you may turn to the title-page, and read thereon, "Olive: a *Novel*." "Most incongruous—most strange!" you may exclaim. Nay, some may even accuse us of irreverence in thus bringing into a fictitious story those subjects which are acknowledged as most vital to every human soul, but yet which most people are content, save at set times and places, tacitly to ignore. There are those who sincerely believe that in such works as this there should never once be named the Holy Name. Yet what is a novel, or, rather, what is it that a novel ought to be? The attempt of one earnest mind to show unto many what humanity is—ay, and more, what humanity might become; to depict what is true in essence through imaginary forms; to teach, counsel, and warn, by means of the silent transcript of human life. Human life without God! Who will dare to tell us we should paint *that*?

Authors, who feel the solemnity of their calling, cannot suppress the truth that is within them. Having put their hands to the plough, they may not turn aside, nor look either to the right or the left. They must go straight on, as the inward voice impels; and He who seeth their hearts will guide them aright. (223-24, italics original)⁶²

The novel announces itself as "debatable ground," the narrator preempting the readers' response—"Most incongruous—most strange"—to a seemingly irreverent and yet in fact prophetic text; a text like Novalis's fairy tale. Like Harold's library it holds

⁶² Louisa Parr notes that

it is curious to read the objections raised at the time against bringing into fiction "subjects most vital to the human soul." One critic, after describing the hero he is willing to accept—and, much to our regret, space prevents us showing this terrible model that we have escaped—says: "But a hero whose intellectual crotchets, or delusions, or blindness, are to be entrusted for repairs to a fascinating heroine—a mental perplexity which is to be solved in fiction—a deep-rooted scepticism which is to lose its *vis vitæ* according to the artistic demands of a tale of the fancy, this we cannot away with. Sceptics are not plastic and obliging. Would to Heaven scepticism *could* be cured by bright eyes, dulcet tones, and a novelist's art of love!" Criticisms in this tone make more plain to us the difficulties which novelists in the fifties had to grapple with. (Louisa Parr, "Dinah Mulock [Mrs. Craik]," *Women Novelists of Queen Victoria's Reign: A Book of Appreciations*, by Mrs. Oliphant et al. [N.p.: Folcroft, 1969] 227-28, italics original)

seemingly disparate texts in balance and writes women's texts into the field of religion, into "truth."

The library relates all texts "orthodox and heterodox" back to "the great original of all creeds—the Book of Books" (89), "the book on which [...] every form of religion is founded" (220), a library in itself. As in Harold's library, within this meta-library is contained "the revelation [...] as clear and distinct from the mass of modern creeds with which it has been overlaid" (220), "that lore—at once the most simple and most divine—the Gospels of the New Testament" (213). (The Gospels are also distinguished from the inevitable historical limitations of the Old Testament.) "Simple" perhaps, but true religious text is both plain and poetical, and, again using the allegory of the child's education, Craik emphasises that "imaginary forms" are crucial to the experience of truth.

Now and then—once in particular she remembered—old Elspie fell asleep; and then Olive turned to her favourite study, the Book of Revelations [sic]. Childlike, she terrified herself over the mysterious prophecies of the latter days, until at last she forgot the gloom and horror, in reading of the "beautiful city, New Jerusalem."

She seemed to see it—its twelve gates, angel-guarded, its crystal river, its many-fruited tree—the Tree of Life. Her young but glowing fancy, unable to separate truth from allegory, created out of these marvels a paradise, material in itself. She knew not that heaven is only the continual presence of the Eternal. Yet she was happy; and in her dreams she never pictured the land beyond the grave, but there came back to her, as though the nearest foreshadowing of its deep, holy rest, the visions of that Sunday afternoon. (98)

The child's reading of Revelation is valorised. As she had regarding gender ideology (and as briefly noted above, 143), Craik exploits the "debatable" nature of "fairy," using it as both a critique and model of Christianity. She distinguishes the "mystic

horrors of Calvinistic predestination," for example, from the truth of Providence, figured as a giant Fate (96). Truth and falsity are often so juxtaposed, using fairy-lore in the place of the equally ambiguous, but more controversial, "myth." Fairy-lore, the "nursery tale," is also used to hold truth and allegory in tension and with the child's reading of Revelation, Craik's earlier dismissal of parody, of burlesque, is rescinded. In order to be understood on earth "the solemn, almost fathomless mysteries of Christianity [must be] lowered," "the Bible [is necessarily] travestied into a nursery tale," brought within the domestic.⁶³ Craik is arguing that revelation itself is "debatable ground": a logical resolution of the form/truth debate is impossible and faith in the Incarnation demands the two be held in tension.

Drawing on the "orthodox and heterodox" texts of the library—fairy-lore, biblical-lore and Swedenborg⁶⁴—the salvation of Harold is shown to lie in his achieving "ironic childhood." The ironic clergyman, where the gap between truth and form produces satire and hypocrisy, must be reborn as an ironic child, where truth is incarnate. Harold must learn to read as a child, as Olive and her mother do every night,

⁶³ Craik's use of Revelation is also interesting in terms of Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang's point that in the nineteenth century the modern familial heaven replaces John's vision:

It was the home, and not the church, which writers described as the "antitype" of heaven. [...] Since home reflected heaven, heavenly activities resembled domestic activities—and not ecclesiastical worship. The type of divine worship found in the book of Revelation had little in common with nineteenth-century family life. Worship was still used as a model for heaven, but it had to be *family* worship. (*Heaven: A History* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1988] 272, italics original.)

Craik's reading reconciles the old and new versions.

⁶⁴ Obviously Craik is drawing on New Testament imagery. Christ was the first "ironic child", the first (Christian) subject of his own narrative, a narrative that promoted the child as Christian type e.g.: Mark 10:14-15: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. / Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." Emphasising this image involves something of a revision of the Pauline: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. / For now we see as through a glass, darkly: but then face to face: now I know in part: but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor. 13:11-12). Harold need not, should not "put away childish things," and here on earth, as already noted, one can come "face to face" in woman (166).

Swedenborg is another of the texts in Harold's "theological library." To become a man (that is, completed man, in the Swedenborgian sense of conjugal love where women and men become complete in each other), one must first become a child. The Swedenborgian soul becomes more childlike as it progresses in spiritual wisdom. See McDannell and Lang 202. Swedenborg himself—as both scientist and visionary—is a model for Harold; the library also contains the two Newtons, juxtaposing science and the queen of sciences (89).

the last few chapters of *Revelation*: "the blessed words, the delight of her [Olive's] childhood—telling of the heavenly kingdom, and the after-life of the just" (204).

This infantilisation is brought about by the fairy-teller. As Harold begins to regain faith, as his "mind echoes [...Olive's] words," "a child-like peace [is] creeping into [...his] heart. All human affections are growing closer and dearer [...]" (222). Brontë symbolically emasculates Rochester by blinding and crippling him in the fire at Thornfield; in the fire at Farnwood Craik infantilises Harold: "His whole face seemed softened and spiritualized" and "With childlike helplessness there seems to come a childlike peace" (311). This peace is achieved because Harold had "'learnt from [...Olive] that holy faith which conquers death," Olive is his "life's good angel'" (312). While Harold is making his "love-confession" he lies on Olive's breast like a child (313-14) and "She love[s] him at once with the love of mother, sister, friend, and wife" (314).

Human love and desire are the proofs of Providence: "can you believe in human love, yet doubt the love of Him who is its origin?" asks Olive, "Can you think that He would give the yearning for the hereafter, and yet deny its fulfilment? That what He made good He will not make happy, and what He makes happy He will not make immortal?" (210-11). Theology is ultimately a matter of feeling, not abstract knowledge: Olive opposes the maternal and filial bond to Harold's question, "can one love him when one does not fully know?" (187) by rhetorically asking "can such love end with death?" (212).

As in her other work, Craik's central image of divine love is the married couple. Her language and imagery blends sexual and religious desire into a seamless whole: "one great want—one glorious image that should have risen above them all, melting them into a grand harmonious whole. [...] 'that great mystery which crowns all life [...] Love!'" (162). Olive's dark night of the soul (ch. 35) is not religious doubt as such but romantic, and is resolved by anticipating marriage in heaven (232), another Swedenborgian note. The "crowning moment of life [...]" blends two hearts of man and woman into one love, making their being complete and all perfect, as God meant it

should be" (303), and after many trials and tribulations this is the end of Olive's pilgrimage:

over a long course of past time, her fancy went back, discerning how all things had worked together to this end. She saw how patience had ripened into hope, and suffering into joy. Not one step of the whole weary way had been trodden in vain—not one thorn had pierced her feet, that had not while entering there distilled a saving balm. [...] her lips uttered the words with which Mrs Flora had blessed her. "O God, I thank Thee, for Thou hast given me my heart's desire!" (315)

"Fulfilment" is found in "the still, sacred love of marriage. And, however your modern heart-infidels may doubt, and your free-thinking heart-desecrators scoff, *that* is the true love—the tie which God created from the beginning, making man and woman to be one flesh, and pronouncing it 'good'" (324, italics original).

Olive's fairy-tale ending is equally a Providence. Through the auspices of Olive's aunt Flora ("a saint on earth" [266]) Olive and Harold respectively inherit the house at Morningside (a reference to Bunyan's House Beautiful from where can be seen the Delectable Mountains⁶⁵) and a legacy. This allows them to marry (skipping the bourgeois practicalities of income) and confirms their residence in "debatable ground": Beulah, on the borders of heaven. *Olive* concludes with a tableau of the "true man and woman, husband and wife," the man having been led by the fairy along the winding road to the summit of the Braid Hills where (like Christian on the Delectable Mountains) they look "up to Heaven to guide their way" (331).

Though it is Olive who has led them to within sight of the city of Revelation and "[sent] the cobwebs out of [Harold's] brain," something of the Ellisian fairy's duplicity seems to come into play: "Olive never let him see how skilfully she did this lest his man's dignity should revolt at being so lovingly beguiled" (330). The arts of

⁶⁵ "The Pilgrim they laid in a large upper chamber, whose window opened towards the sun rising: the name of the chamber was Peace; where he slept till break of day [...]." Compare, for example, *Olive* ch. 37.

fairy, reconfigured as Christian, enable a feminine apocalypse⁶⁶; the "debatable ground," however, also allows opposing readings of *Olive*, a truly radical ambiguity. The borders of heaven are something of a social blueprint; the final redemption of patriarchy is reliant on female emancipation. Flora's will allows Olive to enter marriage as an equal, for example, and (in another Swedenborgian touch) non-biological motherhood is validated.⁶⁷ Through her own desire, and confirming the angel-artist's usurpation of the conduct-book heroine, Olive is now the rightful mother of Sara's daughter, Ailie. Moreover, at the time of her marriage Olive, as Kaplan contends, is clearly "an established artist" (xx). Possibly misled by the apocalyptic fire at Farnwood (which is less a purification of impropriety than a necessary stage in the progression toward paradise), but also by the ambiguities of Craik's text as she attempts to prevent male "revolt," Paula Gillet believes Olive is "no longer a practicing artist" on marriage.⁶⁸ Gillet has fallen prey to what Kaplan calls "Craik's determination to make [Olive] at every moment the angel in the house, an impossible example of actively virtuous femininity exercised always in the passive tense" (xxiii). Olive goes about "her little household duties" with her "artist-soul" (325) intact, however, and even if it is more of a struggle, as Craik does not fail to note, the angel-artist continues to produce. Moreover, Olive's time is not simply being taken up by domesticity but also by her implied study of science (325).

⁶⁶ Wheeler notes that "the language of apocalypse is an aspect of [...] shared culture and a potent force in [...] mid-century novelists' writing. For Romantic novelists [...] the language of the Revelation was an aspect of their 'poetry'" (Wheeler 113). Craik's novel is also clearly indebted to the feminine Romanticism of 1780-1830 noted by Anne Mellors with its stress on "the value of rational love, an ethic of care, and gender equality as a challenge both to a domestic ideology that confined women within the home and to a capitalist laissez-faire system that would set the rights of the individual, free-will or rational choice, and an ethic of justice above the needs of the community as a whole" (84). Incidentally, Mellors notes that this "feminine Romanticism is a direct descendent of the eighteenth-century tradition of enlightened protestant dissent" (64); she does not, however, deal with religion: her feminine Romantics' apocalypse is a gradual rationalist Revelation, the promotion of "a politics of gradual rather than violent social change, a social change that extends the values of domesticity into the public realm" (2-3).

⁶⁷ In heaven children are reared by women who want to be mothers, not necessarily their biological mothers (McDannell and Lang 221).

⁶⁸ Paula Gillett, *Worlds of Art: Painters in Victorian Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1990) 150.

Olive, both "orthodox and heterodox," has saved an erring clergyman by leading him out of the fold and into debatable ground. Unsurprisingly Harold's reconstructed faith is not strictly orthodox: "though that heart was pure and open in the sight of God and in *her* sight, it might not be so in that of every man. [...] his faith was now the Christian faith—even, in most points, that of the Church—still, there was in his nature a stern simplicity which somewhat cast aside forms" (317, italics original). As we have seen, to "somewhat cast aside forms" allows Romanticism without Romanism, a Protestant Romanticism. Craik's theology fits within Reardon's definition:

Romanticism [...] marked a re-evaluation of religion as an experience the authenticity of which must be sought within itself. If such authenticity could not, primarily at least, be found there it would be found nowhere. Abstract argument, as essentially extrinsic to the experience itself, was unavailing. Faith has its roots in feeling and intuition, of which theological doctrines can never be more than an imaginative symbolism, historically determined.⁶⁹

"Feeling and intuition" being traditionally feminine qualities, the elevation of the feminine is also a Romantic trait, and one accentuated by Craik. The Christian God (or his text) and Olive (and her text) are the two new sources of authority for faith. Olive recommends: "I follow no ritual, and trust no creed, except so far as I find it in the Holy Word" (211). A deceptively simple economy of faith is, however, revealed as a highly complex grammar of assent, as Olive (and Craik) leads her readers directly to that part of the Holy Word where interpretation is particularly fraught, and then promotes an "ironic" reading where allegory is necessary to truth, and the "fairy" necessary to faith.

⁶⁹ Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religion in the Age of Romanticism: Studies in Early 19th Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 29.

In the same way the fairy tale is "something like 'a new genre,'" Craik's somatic theology is "somewhat rejected forms," exploiting its ambiguous relationship with tradition for modern ends: political, social and theological. Rosemary Jackson's schema would ally Craik with Charles Kingsley, as one of those who, she considers, deny the subversive potential of fantasy. Manlove (see above, ch. 1, 29-32) would not even understand such a novel as Christian fantasy. And yet Craik's narrative transforms the female child and its congenitally deformed body—exemplum of the evangelical doctrine of original sin and its specifically female provenance (the Rothesay women with yellow hair are emblematic of the curse of Eve)—converting it via the fairy tale into a sign of grace. Moreover, this female "ironic child" is an agent of Providence, a tracer of the "threads of guidance" (275) who replaces law with "lore" and takes over the patriarch's role: "her father's desk [is] now her own" (108).

Chapter Five. "The Fancies of a Believer": *Fin de Siècle* Oliphant and "Idiomatic" Christianity

[A] simple Christian has much licence in exercising his own thoughts, or even indulging his own fancies, in attempting to account for some things which have not been made clear by revelation. (Oliphant, "The Fancies of a Believer," *Blackwood's* 157 [Feb. 1895]: 237)

[Christianity has] a living literature [...] not a mere repertory of doctrinal texts [...] embellished] by later notions and controversial fictions. [...] There are eternal truths [...] but it is the very nature of these truths, and the deeper inquiry which they continually excite, to take ever new expression. (Principal Tulloch 1885)¹

Oliphant's supernatural fictions are indeed "religious" insofar as they provide a phenomenology of faith in that which cannot be fully grasped. But I would argue that these fictions are not, except idiomatically, Christian. Her last supernatural tale, "The Library Window" (1896), finds Oliphant veering away from faith in a Christian God, toward an entirely secular faith in what we might call [...] the "afterlife" of the author. [...] Bidding farewell to the supernatural, she dispenses with both gothicism and Christian piety as so many magic rings. (Esther H. Schor "The Haunted Interpreter in Margaret Oliphant's Supernatural Fiction," *Trela* 107-08)

If Craik's *Olive* transcribes a mid-century shift from art to religion, Esther Schor seem to suggest that Oliphant's "The Library Window" is part of the *fin de siècle* movement from religion to art. Conflating chronological and signficatory ultimacy in

¹ John Tulloch, *Movements of Religious Thought in Britain During the Nineteenth Century*, 1885, with an introduction by A. C. Cheyne, The Victorian Library (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1971) 332 and 334. It is dedicated to Mrs. Oliphant (in an "amusingly fulsome dedication" says Cheyne 33), who later wrote her friend's biography. Cheyne describes Tulloch as "one of the most distinguished and influential representatives of Scotland's 'Broad Church' school" (16).

order to come to this conclusion, however, is somewhat disingenuous, particularly in respect to an author who continued working almost until her death a year and a half later in June, 1897. "The Library Window," although Jay calls it a "valedictory" tale,² is not in fact Oliphant's final published tale of the seen and the unseen: "The Land of Suspense" came out in *Blackwood's* in January 1897. In order to read the relationship between Oliphant's work and the end of the century, rather than single out one text I want to explore a cluster of short texts: "*Dies Irae*": *The Story of a Spirit in Prison* (1895); "The Library Window: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen" (1896); and "The Land of Suspense: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen" (1897).³ These are Oliphant's last three stories of the Seen and the Unseen, although only two of the tales are subtitled as such. These two are, respectively, an atmospheric ghost story of (what would become known as) the Jamesian kind and a sentimental rendition of Limbo which seems to have more in common with the delineation of heaven and hell in "*Dies Irae*" (albeit this latter vision is sharper and socially focussed). Although the three stories thus seem to illustrate the often made point that Oliphant's Tales of the Seen and the Unseen form a disparate group linked under one rubric partly for pragmatic reasons, I want to abide by Oliphant's denomination (acknowledging the obviously related subtitle of "*Dies Irae*"), and assume connections between these three eschatological fantasies.⁴ In so doing I will consider the notion of an "idiomatic Christianity" and its links with the desiring female body. "Idiomatic," in Schor's terminology, is a dismissive adjective, denoting a matter of style, of cultural usage as opposed to individual intent,

2 Jay *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself": A Literary Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 23.

3 "*Dies Irae*": *The Story of a Spirit in Prison*, Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1895; "The Library Window: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen," *Blackwood's* (Jan. 1896); and "The Land of Suspense: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen," *Blackwood's* 161 (Jan. 1897).

4 Acknowledging the common impulse that led Oliphant to write her Stories of the Seen and the Unseen, Jay divides them into "tales that chart the landscape and activities of the afterlife and those where the story makes sorties into an alternative world from an earthbound base" (*Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 158). Jay's awareness that such a division is overschematic is itself borne out by her discussion of "*Dies Irae*" as a tale of the afterlife, when in fact "*Dies Irae*" is a precise instance of a spiritual "sortie" into the other world; presumably this distinction also results in the "valedictory" status of "The Library Window." Schor suggests a commercial provenance for the common rubric (Trela 91) and her summation of the religious/secular significance of these texts (partially quoted above) perhaps presupposes a distinction such as Jay's, thus explaining her (still inappropriate) "teleological" reading of "The Library Window" (Trela 107).

of a conservative perhaps nostalgic veneer masking a more radical sentiment, a matter of surface not substance. Exploring the stylistic and thematic links between Oliphant's fantasies—the Oliphantian "idiom"—and Oliphant's own investigations of "idiomatic" Christianity, I hope to uncover and weigh the valences of the relationships between the woman writer, "idiomatic" Christianity, and late Victorian secularity and aestheticism.

1. "*Dies Iræ*": *The Story of A Spirit in Prison* (1895)

"*Dies Iræ*" is the first-person narration of a young middle-class woman's near-death experience, in which, with the help of the Blessed Damozel, she learns the true meaning of Hell and of charity. While the voices in the multivocal *A Beleaguered City* were fictional, "*Dies Iræ*" draws in a number of "texts," including "the voices of spiritual authorities such as Dante and Coleridge" noted by Jay (210). As the title, and the Dantean antecedents, suggest, Oliphant uses a hymn-like, or liturgical structure, interspersing various refrains in order to achieve plot transitions and thematic counterpoint. In part 1 this refrain is from the first few stanzas of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel" (1850), which, along with other heavenly citations, is replaced in Part 2 when "the *Dies Iræ* began to repeat itself in my brain" (15), the medieval hymn evoking the dreadful Day of Judgement itself accompanied by the pleas for divine mercy from the Anglican litany. This opposition of the two motifs—encapsulated in the apparent pun of the title, *Dies Iræ*/ *Désirer*—is played out by the text.

The Blessed Damozel is, of course, the narrator's Beatrice, and Oliphant's introduction to Dante's *Vita Nuova* had strenuously asserted the reality of Dante's love, describing Beatrice as "the embodiment of all purity and gentle wisdom, yet not a Virtue, always Beatrice, most loved and revered of women, yet a women still."⁵

⁵ Oliphant, *Dante*, Foreign Classics for English Readers (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1877) 50. "To some critics [...the *Vita Nuova*] has seemed an allegory from beginning to end, and these writers have found in the peerless Beatrice no true woman at all, but only an emblem of heavenly wisdom, the highest light and inspiration of the soul. This far-fetched theory we are fortunately not called upon to discuss [...]" (ibid. 18).

While Oliphant utilises the physicality of Rossetti's *Blessed Damsel*, she transposes the eroticism of Rossetti's version into an expression of maternal desire, the yearned for fulfilment not sexual, but familial. In part this shift is achieved through the extraction of liturgical and scriptural texts from their original marital context. The Marriage Service's "to have and to hold," for example, is repositioned by Oliphant to refer to the relationship of "one loving woman to one struggling sister" (76); together, in "loving embrace," the narrator and the Blessed Damsel are "'as the angels of God'" (57).⁶

Another contemporary version of Rossetti's "The Blessed Damsel" is James Byam Shaw's painting of the same name which, like Oliphant's text, appeared in 1895.⁷ Because Byam Shaw's adaptation of Rossetti shares some major themes with Oliphant's revision, his different perspective on these shared themes helps throw Oliphant's depiction into full relief. Like Oliphant, Byam Shaw shifts the emphasis from the lover to the mother. The painting illustrates the hoped-for presentation of the lover by the Blessed Damsel to "the lady Mary," her five handmaidens and the angels (stanzas 18-19). As Byam Shaw has placed the Blessed Damsel and her lover to the extreme right of the pictorial space and made "the dear Mother" the focal point of the painting, the "Blessed Damsel" of the title seems to refer to the Virgin rather than the subject of Rossetti's poem. Also like Oliphant, as we shall see, Byam Shaw depicts the state of bliss as an essentially feminine space. His canvas is crowded with female figures, including the angels who in the poem accompany Christ and are not definitively gendered (stanza 21) but here are decidedly female and part of Mary's retinue; the sole

⁶ To read Oliphant as simply translating a heterosexual into a lesbian eroticism would neglect the fundamentally maternal nature of her characterisation of (potentially transgressive) female desire. The nature of heavenly human relations had been an issue for Oliphant at least since the time of her daughter Maggie's death in 1864:

All this is fanciful, perhaps wrong, but I cannot help it. They neither marry nor give in marriage our Lord said, but if heaven was ignorant of the bonds of nature it surely would be no heaven for the spirits of men. Do they dwell in families, in long succession of kindred and race. Was my mother called to receive the child who was her baby as well as mine? Oh if one could but know, if anyhow even in a dream I could but for a moment see my Maggie with the family in heaven [...]. (*The Autobiography*, ed. Jay 7)

⁷ James Byam Shaw, *The Blessed Damsel*, 1895, Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London, *Magnificent Dreams: Burne-Jones and the Late Victorians*, by Frances Spalding (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978) pl. 62, p. 75.

male figure, the lover, is only just inside the pictorial space, awkwardly intruding into female space.

Despite the resulting marginalization of male desire within the pictorial space, however, the painting assumes the male gaze, positioning the viewer, like the male lover, as a voyeuristic intruder on an intimate female spectacle. Byam Shaw thus retains Rossetti's heterosexual eroticism and, as one might expect, de-emphasises the maternity of Mary. In strong contrast Oliphant's Blessed Damozel is "the dear Mother" in a specific sense that also incorporates the figure of Mary. She is the narrator's spiritual and (implied) biological mother ("I have loved you," she had murmured, 'all your life upon the earth'" [14]. "From the day that you were born, I have had you in my care'" [32]. The narrator is "like a child in her arms" [35]).⁸ Madonna-like, she intercedes for the narrator with God the judge, successfully pleading the narrator's youthful ignorance of poverty, of sorrow and, most importantly, of love, as mitigating factors (28-29), excusing the narrator's sinful failure to assist those in need, the outward sign of which is the narrator's solitary arrival in the afterlife.

While incorporating elements of Mary, the Blessed Damozel is in a very important respect distinguished from the Virgin, who is "alone of all her sex." Oliphant's Blessed Damozel, like Rossetti's, is multiple. While Rossetti creates a kind of frieze of the reunited heterosexual couples in his 1878 painting, Oliphant's text shows several maternal (biological and non-biological) meetings, and having learnt the true meaning of love the narrator is rewarded by herself becoming a Blessed Damozel.⁹

⁸ Another source for "*Dies Ira*" is Cardinal Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865), an extended poetic treatment of the progress of the soul towards the judgement seat. Contrary to Oliphant's extremely physical, feminine and maternal Blessed Damozel, Newman's incorporeal and immaculate masculine angel describes his relationship with the soul of Gerontius thus: "My Father gave / In charge to me / This child of earth / E'en from its birth, / To serve and save [...]." See John Henry Newman *Collected Poems and The Dream of Gerontius* (Sevenoaks, Kent: Fisher, 1992) 146. The feminizing tendencies of the *fin de siècle* are also seen in Elgar's decision, in his choral version of *The Dream of Gerontius* (1900), to feminize Newman's angel.

⁹ Michael Wheeler identifies a female couple amongst Rossetti's reunited lovers in *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 152. While such a motif might contribute to a discussion of Oliphant's version of the Blessed Damozel, I myself cannot see such a couple, even allowing for the hirsuteness of the model, Jane Morris.

Although reassured by the Blessed Damozel that she "will one day awake in His likeness,...so shall I,...and we shall be satisfied" (33), the climax of the narrator's heavenly experience is in fact her realisation of her likeness to the Blessed Damozel: like her guide the narrator now embodies the "beauty of holiness" (82-83). "Holiness" itself is defined in feminine terms and according to a female authority; "Holiness," writes "a sister on Earth," is "an Infinite Sympathy for others" (83). The Victorians considered the exercise of charity, and in particular the carrying out of "rescue work," an occupation peculiarly suited to women. According to Prochaska, female philanthropy was legitimated by a feminine hermeneutics.¹⁰ Here Oliphant extends this activity beyond the patriarchal institutional text.

"*Dies Irae*," then, is a feminization: of the *imago dei*, of the state of salvation, of the theological text. It is an attempt to close "the great gulf fixed" between desire and the divine, between hell, earth and heaven. The final judgement, the "one day [when we] awake in His likeness" (33), while promising textual closure through the divine fulfilment of desire ("and we shall be satisfied"), is suspended. The narrator's bodily resurrection is into the world of the living, back to earth, where she will have the opportunity to express her new knowledge and be "One loving woman to one struggling sister,... [...] for ever" (85). Although highly individualised, "*Dies Irae*" is Oliphant's feminine version of the "social gospel" of the second half of the century, focussed on earth, not heaven.¹¹

¹⁰ F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) 14-16.

¹¹ Jay's reading of "*Dies Irae*" stresses the divergence of Oliphant's views on charity from popular opinion and only highlights Oliphant's use of male texts, texts incorporated as a legitimacy strategy.

As she looked back from the vantage-point of the 1890s she became acutely aware that her convictions about the private exercise of charity had, as in so many other matters of personal morality, caused her to grow increasingly out of step with society's preferred maxims. The very gesture of resorting to the non-realist domain of the "Stories of the Seen and the Unseen" may indicate her sense of the disturbing power needed to overturn the norms of contemporary terrestrial society. [...] "*Dies Irae*" (1895) attempted to provide a respectable lineage to her own philosophy of good only being achieved by "one loving woman" ministering to "one struggling sister" by articulating it through the voices of spiritual authorities such as Dante and Coleridge. Money and institutionalized aid only serve to pauperize and demoralize the recipient. (Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself* 209-10)

In *John Halifax, Gentleman* Craik had used the "Dies Irae" to symbolise the theological shift away from Calvinism (see above, ch. 2, 74).¹² Similarly Oliphant's text scores a theological transposition: lines of wrath and finality become words of "infinite sympathy," a phrase resonant with such late century dismissals of traditional eschatology as F. W. Farrar's *Eternal Hope* (1878). Oliphant's treatment is far more complex than Craik's simple change of key, however. Craik's Christocentrism is replaced with a kind of matriology, and the relationship between divine law and love is complicated by desire. Hermeneutics becomes a crucial issue: the narrator's salvation depends on her learning to correctly "read" the living Word, understanding the subtleties of literal and figurative language.

"Yet one thing thou lackest,"...she quoted.

"One thing thou lackest," I repeated after her. "Sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor.' But that,...we were told that was not meant literally."

"Its 'spirit' giveth life."

"Its 'Spirit'!"...

"Its spirit is Love, and Love is Everlasting Life."

I was deeply bewildered.

"But"—a strange fear beginning to gather round my heart—"the pains of hell, they at least were an invention of narrow-minded men, of whom Calvin was the chief: not even for the wicked do they exist!"

"I can believe in no hell," I went on passionately, finding my guide slow to answer, "for with it there could be no heaven. I for one," daringly, being deeply imbued with the latest sentiments I had listened to on earth—"I could not be happy in the highest heaven if I knew there was one poor soul imprisoned in a hell." (24-25)

¹² Wheeler points to the popularity of the hymn in the nineteenth century: "Of the 99 English translations of the hymn *Dies Irae* made between 1621 and 1895, 88 are dated after 1800." A study of these was published in 1897. See Wheeler *Death and the Future Life* 117.

Although "*Dies Irae*" is a rejection of traditional eschatology the simplistic configuration/"deliteralization" of the "latest sentiments" is also rejected. Hell, the narrator comes to recognise, is the underbelly of her comfortable middle-class existence (48-50). The "pains of hell" are only too real, those of the late-century hell on earth documented, for example, in William Booth's *In Darkest England* (1890).

The narrator first encounters Hell as Pandemonium, "Jean Paul Richter['s...] Hell of sound" (38); Heaven's liturgical orderliness gives way to "a confused wailing of many voices, sounding [...] every note of pain" (37). With the guidance of the Avenging Angel, the narrator learns to distinguish within the nightmarish cacophony the voices of the mundane and its prosaic texts: hearing "nothing that was not of Earth, and already familiar to me through the newspaper columns of the day," "the annual statistics of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children," or "the latest results of inquiries in East London" (61, 62 and 64).

Spectacles of physical violation, primarily of female bodies, are staged for the narrator: "the light detached them from the whole, and for a time I was made to see them [...] in a succession of horrors that was agonising" (61)—the starving woman, the raped maiden, the beaten child, the suicide. The crucial episode in the narrator's spiritual education, her "quest after Love" (56), is her encounter with the suicide, her impoverished double (the same age, 25) and a mirror-image of Rossetti's Blessed Damozel, standing "on the brink of the Unknown" (63), effectively the rampart of Heaven. As the description of her leap into the river "like a bird" suggests, her suicide—traditionally a plummet into hell—is, unquestionably, an assumption: "What angel would greet *her* as she emerged from the mist? I thanked heaven that she went into God's good keeping [...]." The narrator's rhetorical assumption is counterpointed by "the shrill laughter of the woman of sin," whose fate the suicide has jumped to avoid (73-74, italics original).¹³

¹³ Oliphant is contrasting the murder of others through neglect with what, until the 1870s, was still considered as a form of homicide—*felo-de-se*, self-murder. Ironically Oliphant's suicide kills herself in order to preserve her physical integrity. In the '90s the upward trend in suicide rates was published and so-called "suicidal mania" was noted, as was the aesthetic "New Wertherism." Suicide prevention, a new kind of "rescue work," became a focus of social reform. See Barbara T. Gates,

The narrator's experience of Hell is also, as for Hell's inhabitants, the loss of physical integrity; without a physical body she is powerless to assist those in pain. Hell is the "ever-present pain of powerlessness" (76). Without a body she has no significance, no ability to act (60); or, to put it another way, the loss of effective subjectivity, of agency, is figured as the loss of the physical body. This loss of agency is most tellingly demonstrated in the narrator's dialogue with the suicide when her voice is misidentified as the suicide's own conscience (66). But the disembodiment wrought by death is also experienced as coercion. In the judgement scene the narrator is forcibly interpolated into institutional Christian discourse, involuntarily voicing the litany: "*Mea Culpa! mea culpa!*"... (29). With the Avenging Angel, she is "made" to see. Strictly speaking, salvation through Christ should gain release from the "prison" of the story's subtitle.¹⁴

The narrator is following Christ's journey through hell, a journey also undertaken by the Blessed Damozel, but while the narrator disavows kinship with either, protesting that she "could never be as Christ, or even as my sweet lady" (59), she does become as the latter. And this metamorphosis marks a transformation from subjection into subjectivity and a "new equality" typed as sisterhood (78). It is the kindling of the narrator's sororal and maternal desire and her resulting embrace of the hellish discord that marks her achievement of Holiness: "Instead of closing my ears to the continuous wail of pain, my eyes to the saddening sights, my arms seemed to stretch themselves out in pure yearning towards that sorrowing multitude [...]" (75). This feminine desire transposes the confusion and irony of Babel (which also includes scriptural texts and her own words, mockingly quoted back at her by the "imp[s] of darkness" [52-53]) into the eschatological multivocality of Pentecost. The mockery of

"Suicide," in *The 1890s: An Encyclopedia of British Literature, Art, and Culture* (New York: Garland, 1993) 598-99.

¹⁴ "I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house" (Isa. 42:6-7); "the Lord [...] hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound" (Isa. 61:1).

hell is replaced by a celebration of female voice and agency, a brief space where the "daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17). This is a place free from coercion, where the narrator's own words are both legitimate and desired: "No word would she [the Blessed Damozel] speak in answer, but her look was eloquent of triumph at every word I spoke, and pleaded for more,...more..." (79).

This space—where women can "go forth together, as 'ministers of grace'" (81)—remains utopian, a truly separate sphere. "Has it been a dream," the text wonderingly concludes, "a dream and nothing more?" (86).¹⁵ In the apocalyptic space of the liturgical "Dies Iræ" the Sibyl speaks in harmony with David,¹⁶ but Oliphant it seems cannot imagine such a relationship between woman's voice and institutional Christianity, even in heaven. The divine call to the narrator and the Blessed Damozel to join the heavenly party is transposed into the clergyman's bathetic call back to earth, a reinterpolation into the world of coercion and constraint—"...I *would* not let her go" (85, italics original). In the world feminine narratorial desire "struggled for utterance," struggled to narrate words of sisterhood, the last despairing words of a suicide (85).

Oliphant explored the fantasy of women's "free" utterance and its cosmic purport elsewhere, and more optimistically. In her "Little Pilgrim" tales, for example, Oliphant, in common with Spiritualists of the day, provided her readers with what McDannell and Lang have termed a "thick description of heaven"¹⁷: fascinating, detailed expositions of the afterlife and its "cultural practices," "cultural practices" that

¹⁵ "Dream" is perhaps in Newman's sense: "thou art wrapped and swathed around in dreams, / Dreams that are true, yet enigmatical; / For the belongings of thy present state, / Save through such symbols, come not home to thee" (Newman, *Collected Poems* 155).

¹⁶ "Day of wrath and doom impending, David's word with Sibyl's blending! Heaven and earth in ashes ending!" Thomas of Celano, "Dies Iræ, Dies Illa," trans. W. J. Irons, no. 351 in *The English Hymnal with Tunes*, new ed. (London: Oxford UP, 1933) 486.

¹⁷ Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 292. Margarete Rubik erroneously believes that the merit of Oliphant's stories lies in their originality: "hardly any other Victorian writer ventured to present such a detailed, concrete and 'realistic' description of heaven or hell" (*The Novels of Mrs. Oliphant: A Subversive View of Traditional Themes*, Writing About Women 8 [New York: Lang, 1994] 280; see also 4, 284 and 297 on the same point). McDannell and Lang, however, note a "proliferation of treatises, articles, fictional accounts, visionary epics, and poetry concerning heaven [...]" (303); see also above, ch. 1, 29n4.

Oliphant made central to revelation. "The Little Pilgrim Goes Up Higher" (1882), for example, identifies humanity's divine purpose as theodicy: God is to be justified through human representation.¹⁸ It is explained that earth is the "chosen race" of the universe, the "example" (120). Faith is the property of humanity, those of the other worlds sometimes doubt the wisdom of God's way, and so humans paint and write history in a great library to "justify the ways of God who is our Father" (124). This story is a utopian legitimation of the domestic novel—and by extension the woman writer—casting the domestic novel as a shadow of the heavenly type, a divinely ordained genre of theodicy: "another book, to show how the grace of the Father was beautiful in some homes and families. It is not the great history, but connected with it: and there are many who love that better than the story which is more great" (102-03).

Oliphant's ostensibly conservative utopia—Christian heaven—is more radical than later century feminist utopias as characterised by Showalter, "where a population of prelapsarian Eves cultivate their organic gardens, cure water pollution, and run exemplary child care centers, but do not write books."¹⁹ Oliphant's treatment of the domestic in "The Little Pilgrim Goes Up Higher" is indicative of the critical function of the utopian, and of the contradictions the utopian embodies (see above, ch. 1, 59). The guiltless exercise of the writer's, and more particularly woman writer's craft, unambiguously presented as expressing divine meaning,²⁰ is particularly telling in the work of a woman whose attitude toward her own literary career and exercise of will in

¹⁸ "The Little Pilgrim Goes Up Higher," 1882, *A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen* (London: Macmillan, 1912).

¹⁹ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, Rev. ed. (London: Virago, 1982) 5.

²⁰ The little pilgrim visits a great Library "full of all the books that had ever been written" (100), used by historians to help complete their work on demonstrating what was the meaning of God in all that had ever happened (91-92). Oliphant is clear that heaven is egalitarian: "It is not as it was [...]. For all of us have work to do which is needed for the worlds, and it is no longer needful that one should sit at home while the other goes forth; for our work is not for our life as of old, or for ourselves, but for the Father who has given us so great a trust. [...] we are in His secret, and it is ours to make it clear" (128-29). Also published in 1882 was Oliphant's *The Literary History of England in the End of the Eighteenth and beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1882), in which she traced the female literary lineage, noting "the sudden development of purely feminine genius [in the Romantic period...] the opening of an entirely feminine strain of the highest character and importance—a branch of art worthy and noble, and in no way inferior, yet quite characteristically feminine [...] opened up for women [...] a new and characteristic path in literature" (3:206-07).

general was highly ambivalent. Showalter defines "Vocation [as] the will to write."²¹ Oliphant was never certain if her volition were not a violation: "To tempt Providence or to trust God, which was it?"²²

Oliphant used theodicy to justify literary production, but theodicy is a point of resistance within theological discourse, and as David Jasper has noted, the very "act" of theodicy can itself be considered inherently heretical: a trespassing on God's turf, a presumption of the human to speak for the divine.²³ In her 1895 non-fictional theodicy "The Fancies of a Believer," Oliphant returned to this problem, her attempt to "seek a certain coherence even amid the mysteries which we cannot fathom" leading her to espouse "that high and blessed contradiction which is in my opinion the very breath and inspiration of the world" (237). Making the human exercise of freewill central to divine purpose she also depicts a creative process in which "fancy" is a curiously volitionless process. It is a Christian's right "in exercising his own thoughts, or even indulging his own fancies, in attempting to account for some things which have not been made clear by revelation," to "let loose the more fanciful or even fantastic impulses of the mind in subordination to a humble Christian fidelity to the faith of the Gospel" (237).

Sometimes it appears to me, when I am "thinking," as we say, that my mind is like an open place, open to all the winds, and that now one thing blows in and through the empty rooms, and now another, like straws or like falling leaves, or like rain or quickly melting snow. [...] Sometimes it will be a line of poetry that

²¹ Showalter *A Literature of Their Own* 21.

²² If I had not unbroken health, and a spirit almost criminally elastic, I could not have done it. I ought to have been worn out by work, and crushed by care, half a hundred times by all rules, but I never was so. [...] I am not very sure [...] that my head might not be a little turned sometimes by a sense of the rashness and dare-devilness, if I may use such a word, of my own proceedings; and it was in its way an immoral, or at least an un-moral, mode of life, dashing forward in the face of all obstacles and taking up all burdens with a kind of levity, as if my strength and resource could never fail. [...] I persuaded myself then that I could not help it, that no better way was practicable, and indeed did live by faith, whether it was or was not exercised in a legitimate way. I might say now that another woman doing the same thing was tempting Providence. (Oliphant, *The Autobiography*, ed. Jay 135)

²³ David Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction*, Studies in Literature and Religion (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) 118.

will blow into the soul, a something, a nothing, for good or for evil [...]. Where do they come from these wandering thoughts? What is the use of them, or is there any use in them?" (249)

There will be many who think this very fantastic, as no doubt it is—and perhaps profane, though it has no such meaning. It floats from me almost against my will, on the wind that carries every straw and falling leaf. Perhaps it may be carried by that vagrant breeze through some one's open doors, who will derive a little fantastic comfort from it like me. (248)

2. *The Library Window: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen* (1896)²⁴

"Fancy" as the act of perception, and then, behind it, the act of writing, features strongly in Oliphant's "The Library Window: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen." "The Library Window" is the first-person narration of an adolescent girl's increasing ability to see into the library window—which may or may not exist—across the street, and her obsession with the incessantly writing man behind this window. The story climaxes with an irreconcilable clash between different modes of perception as to the "reality" of the window, and the sudden end of the visions; far from resolving this tension, the conclusion merely re-poses the enigma. Margaret Gray notes that the tale "stands apart from her other stories in the genre in that it is not religious in subject or tone," and Jay treats it in her chapter on "A Woman of Letters," reading this feminine vision of literary production as the "most accomplished and least self-indulgent account of the woman writer's predicament that Mrs Oliphant ever produced."²⁵ As already noted in the introduction to this chapter, Schor goes even further, reading "The Library

²⁴ Oliphant, "The Library Window: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen" 1896, *A Beleaguered City and Other Stories*, ed. Merryn Williams, The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 289-331. Page references will occur in the text.

²⁵ Margaret K. Gray, ed. *Selected Stories of the Supernatural*, by Margaret Oliphant (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic, 1985) 252n. Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 263.

Window" as a parable of secularity. Many of the images utilised in the story are already familiar, however, central to "The Fancies of a Believer" as well as other Oliphant texts, part of the Oliphantian "idiom." Furthermore, the issues raised by "idiom"—the relationship of form to essence, style to meaning, meaning and style to speaker and reader—are all central to interpreting the significance of the library window. Reading "The Library Window" "idiomatically," in both these senses, begs the question of its relationship with Oliphant's more overtly "religious" texts.

As if she were a younger version of the narrator of "Fancies" the narrator of "The Library Window" is "fantastic and fanciful and dreamy, and all the other words with which a girl who may happen to like poetry, and to be fond of thinking, is so often made uncomfortable" (290). She has "a sort of second-sight"; like the "Fancies" narrator (and the narrator of the contemporaneous *Dies Irae*) she is a kind of matrix, a discursive meeting-point: "Even when reading the most interesting book, the things that were being talked about blew in to me; and I heard what people were saying in the streets as they passed under the window. [...] I could do two or indeed three things at once—both read and listen, and see," a talent for which (like Oliphant's other narrators) she similarly denies agency: "it is curious how I found it in my mind afterwards, as if the air had blown it to me" (291 and 290).

The action of the story begins by posing the mystery of the window across the street from where the narrator sits in her Aunt's window, as to "whether that window opposite is a window or no?" (291). Immediately we are warned that the issue is far more complex than such a simple opposition will allow: "The question is," said my aunt, "if it is a real window with glass in it, or if it is merely painted, or if it once was a window, and has been built up. And the oftener people look at it, the less they are able to say" (292). Through the course of the story the narrator assumes the empirical truth of the window, her attention fixated on the writing man and his text that she only ever sees "through the glass darkly." The narrator describes her youthful self as "very matter-of-fact. I had not found out that one may mean something, yet not half or a hundredth part of what one seems to mean: and even then hoping to be contradicted if it

is anyhow against one's self," and further that "it is a comfort to take refuge in a little ignorance, and I know I pretended not to understand whenever I was put out" (301). The story's conclusion returns to the mystery of the window and its relationship with the ring bequeathed to the narrator by an elderly relative, Lady Carnbee: "Yet I never knew what Aunt Mary meant when she said, 'Yon ring was the token,' nor what it could have to do with that strange window in the old College Library of St Rule's" (331).

Lady Carnbee's diamond ring and the library window are paired images that play on the various meanings of "light": sight and enlightenment. The ring lies inside Lady Carnbee's closed hand, a token of knowledge and power which the narrator fears; a multifaceted stone it both captures and refracts light: "sending out darts of light" it "clutched at my half-terrified imagination. It seemed to mean far more than was said" (293). Lady Carnbee tells the narrator "'I was a support to virtue, like Pamela, in my time'" (298), but to the girl she is "'a witch,'" an identification not rejected by her Aunt (294, 298), although the maledictory implications of this are (309).

Together Lady Carnbee and Mr Pitmilley, Aunt Mary's elderly admirer, perform a microcosmic hermeneutical battle of the sexes. Lady Carnbee, "a clever old lady [...] who could see through a millstone" (306) "always contradicted" Mr Pitmilley, ridiculing his overly simplistic, but well-meaning, positivism (294), symbolised by his "diamond pin [...] which sparkled as much as Lady Carnbee's ring; but [...] was a fine frank kindly stone, that looked you straight in the face and sparkled [...]" (317). It is Mr Pitmilley who orchestrates the decisive visit to the library, and a male professor there who informs the narrator that "'you've been taken in with what appears outside. It was put there to be in uniformity with the window on the stair. But it never was a real window'" (320); it is the image of a window, simply a stylistic device, an "idiomatic" window in the architectural sense.

It is another stone, that which is thrown by the baker's boy, that demonstrates the way in which the ironic descriptions of the window—Lady Carnbee's "just a delusion," Mr Pitmilley's "optical illusion," Aunt Mary's "great divert" (293-94) and the

professor's painted image—are not necessarily equally dismissive. While the narrator is watching the writer inside, the stone hits the window "with a hard sound and without any breaking of glass," a paradoxical synchronicity she only later recognises (311 and 312). The window is simultaneously a matter of style and light in its many senses; there is more than one way to see, and as Lady Carnbee (who significantly draws a distinction between delusion and optical illusion) says, "who ever heard of a window that was no to see through?" (293). The paradoxical and punning nature of the window is again described (idiomatically) by the baker's boy: "It was just yon windy yonder in the library that is nae windy. And it was open—as sure's death. You may laugh if you like. [...] I'm tellin' nae lees [lies...] I couldna' believe it mysel'; but it's true'" (325-26).

Lady Carnbee's ring also symbolises female sexual desire: it is the "token," according to Aunt Mary, that signified the desire of an ancestress for the Scholar-writer.²⁶ He rejected her but her brothers, "that were stirring men," killed him nonetheless (328). The hesitancy of Aunt Mary's narration, in particular her ambivalent portrayal of the female protagonist, highlights the dubious legitimacy of female desire and knowledge: "And one of us, that must have been a light woman, not like you and me—But maybe it was just in innocence; for who can tell?" (328). This family myth does not solve the mystery anyway, given that it too implies a straight-forwardly "real" window. As Jay writes, the use of fairy elements throughout "The Library Window" suggests a more general significance²⁷ and clearly, as the inclusion of the polysemous image of "light" indicates, the significance of Aunt Mary's explanatory myth lies elsewhere than in its literal narrative. But fairy is not the only mythology informing the narrative. The story of a woman whose desire for knowledge inadvertently results in

²⁶ Jay reads this ring as having belonged to the scholar writer (Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 264), but the text rather suggests that it belonged to the "light woman" and was thus handed down through the female line; certainly this reading makes more sense of the ring's connection with illicit desire.

²⁷ "Behind the narrative we are also made strongly aware of the lurking presence of fairy-tale devices and rituals, often the mark in twentieth-century feminist writings of the desire to address collective rather than individual patterns of female experience" (Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 264).

the death of man and an inherited curse on her female descendants clearly resonates with the Christian myth of the Fall, an allegorical reading suggested by "The Library Window's" neoplatonic light: "it is so clear, as if every object was a reflection of itself" (299). The writing man is described as one who inhabits and has mastery of this light, who can see "'between the night and the day, when the fairy folk have power.' This was [...] the light without shadows. It had a spell in it, and sometimes it made me afraid: and all manner of strange thoughts seemed to come in" (314). Despite his mastery of this light the narrator rejects the notion that the writing man is a poet or fiction writer; instead she identifies him as an historian (313), claiming a reality for the liminal perspective and a possible kinship with the historians in the heavenly Great Library in "The Little Pilgrim Goes Up Higher."

The narrator understands the writing man and the process of writing in terms of her father (307, 313) but it is clear there is a link with Lady Carnbee, who also commands, through her ring, "the light without shadows" which "had a spell in it, and sometimes [...] made me afraid: and all manner of strange thoughts seemed to come in [...]."²⁸ Elsewhere Oliphant used the image of refracted light as a symbol for the story-telling process and its female Scots ancestry.²⁹ Despite the narrator's dissociation of

²⁸ Jay writes that "The diamond ring [...] becomes [...] token for the double-edged gift of a woman writer's imagination" (*Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 265).

²⁹ In "Scottish National Character," *Blackwood's* 87 (June 1860), for example, Oliphant noted that "for many a gleam of side-light upon these big transactions [historical events] we are in debt to novel or ballad" (717). Oliphant noted the strong role Scottish women played in the oral culture, and through this their influence on written culture (see, for example, *The Literary History* vol. 2, 100-01). Another facet of this oral culture was the Scottish sense of humour, a quality which was, like other national characteristics, principally embodied in "solitary independent personages, principally ladies, widowed or unmarried":

it is delivered commonly with a dry quietness [...] It is [...] a gleaming eccentric spark, throwing out odd reflections upon things and men, making a glow across unexpected corners, and catching at the brackets and gargoyles. [...] that quality of suggestion, just touching a subject and leaving it, laying its match to the train which imagination itself explodes, a humour accidental and momentary by its very nature [...]. ("Scottish National Character" 721, 730)

Oliphant's sense of the cross-fertilisation between oral and literary culture can again be seen in the way the above description is echoed in her delineation of the creative process:

For our own part, we have no faith at all in facts, nor in study, nor in conscious observation of your neighbour's follies or peculiarities. A trifle here and there catches the creative eye—broken lights from this and that, gleams of comprehension, a sudden sight of how minds are working, of how feelings arise. Anything more than this, definite and formal studies, are very

the writing man from fiction, the coexistence of fancy and history is indicated by the narrator's likening the writing man to her father (who one presumes is a novelist), and, more tellingly in this context, to Sir Walter Scott (307). Scott included poetry, history and antiquarian works among his varied oeuvre, as well as the historical novel, a genre in which "fancy" and history coexist.

The narrator experiences both Aunt Mary's and Lady Carnbee's powers to quell the visions as inimical, and believes Lady Carnbee's ring, which gives her "a sharp malignant prick, oh full of meaning!" (308), to be a "wicked diamond which wished me harm" (298). Lady Carnbee, however, casts herself as a benevolent fairy godmother—"I've wakened you to life, and broke the spell"—a character whose literary powers are used, like Pamela's, to protect female integrity (298). Aunt Mary's "spell" of awakening is unambiguously orthodox: "Like a dream when one awaketh" (Ps. 73:20). As in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, after the climactic vision sight is denied; the narrator no longer sees the writing man in the Library window, and, as her Aunt explains: "It is a longing all your life after—it is a looking—for what never comes" (326). Schor believes that the narrator does not entirely accept the "gothic tale" of explanation told by her aunt, preferring "her own naturalized faith in what she cannot explain" (108). In fact the narrator does not reject tradition; instead she admits that she does not understand it (the tale that is and the ring). While noting the phenomenon of religious change, far from embracing "her own naturalized faith" she mourns the demise of a less Calvinist tradition—"a great pity and loss to Scotland." Although her own "disillusionment" coincides with "Midsummer Day—the day of St John, which was once so much thought of as a festival, but now means nothing at all in Scotland any more than any other of the saint's days" (303), this is not a sign of the triumph of empiricism. In some senses the library window remains open to her, as was suggested in the "disillusionment" scene when the "blow" experienced through another library window reveals bookcases lining the wall where the narrator expects to see her window

unproductive. ("Old Saloon," *Blackwood's* (June 1888): 841, quoted in Vineta Colby and Robert A. Colby *The Equivocal Virtue* 259n25.)

(316-19), and as is symbolised in her possible adult sighting of the writing man. Unlike her female relatives the narrator believes the myth of womanhood is a story open to development: it is as a widow that she sees the man and believes that "if it was he, he means good and no longer harm" (330). The ring, it seems, although the narrator does not understand it, symbolises some kind of atonement. It is fancy that heals the "great gulf fixed," the curse may be over. Female desire for knowledge is perhaps no longer to be punished. Like a wedding band the ring is a "token" of eventual fulfilment, of possible eschatological closure. Like her Aunt, however, who says of the Library window "But I am not sure that I have any desire to satisfy myself" (294), the widowed narrator keeps the ring locked in a box in a lumber-room in a house where she never lives and avows: "If any one would steal it, it would be a relief to my mind" (331).

3. *The Land of Suspense: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen* (1897)

This final "story of the seen and the unseen" is, as Oliphant herself noted, a painfully intimate text, "perhaps too individual for publication." "I do not know if you will care to have the 'Land of Suspense' to complete the series," she wrote to her publisher, "It hurt me to publish anything so personal, but if there is any comfort in the communion of sorrowful souls, it was perhaps worth doing, and one's personality will be so soon blotted out."³⁰ Written following the death of Oliphant's last surviving child, the story traces the awakening of a rather selfish young man (a thinly disguised portrait of her son) into the afterlife as a disembodied spirit and his eventual birth into the "spiritual body," achieved through his empathy for the grieving mother. Jay sees this tale as the apotheosis of Oliphant's retreat from theology into self-referentiality: "in her fiction she had long ago ceased to use the images of mothering as a way of making God intelligible and gradually reduced the Trinity to a deeply caring single parent

³⁰ Oliphant, "To Mr Craik," 13 Jan. 1897 and n.d. 1897, *Autobiography and Letters* 430.

wounded by her children's rejection," a movement that parallels a shift from the "overtly pious novels" of midcentury to those later novels "more secular in tone."³¹ What does this last overtly religious story tell us about the relationship between the individual voice and secular tone? Does it simply illustrate the privatisation/secularization thesis by subsuming all difference into the personal world of relationships, including the distinctions between divine and human? Has God simply become a reflection of the author? Or, as in "The Library Window," does the "idiomatic" reveal the negotiation of a more complex relationship between the word and the body? In order to highlight these issues I want to situate this story within an autobiographical context, reading "The Land of Suspense" as part of Oliphant's own narrative of female experience, a narrative that included the incorporation of Christian "idiom" into (in Jay's phraseology) Oliphant's "fiction" of "herself."

Oliphant wrote fictional and non-fictional consolation literature—the "fantastic comfort" of "Fancies"—to open what she called "the dreadful door of separation," "[...] Death [...] which cuts down remorseless everything we have ever built upon, and postpones to an indefinite future all that we have to say [...]."³² By the time she wrote *A Beleaguered City* she had mourned four of her own children and the nephew she had raised, both her parents, and her husband. From the time of the death of her daughter in 1864 she had wrestled privately with doubts—not as to the existence of God, a matter she situated firmly beyond the text—but with the apparent opposition of the human mother and the Heavenly Father; her "underlying conviction that God would not take my ewe-lamb, my woman-child from me" had been betrayed.³³

All this is fanciful, perhaps wrong, but I cannot help it. They neither marry nor give in marriage our Lord said, but if heaven was ignorant of the bonds of nature it surely would be no heaven for the spirits of men. Do they dwell in families, in

³¹ Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: A Fiction to Herself* 173 and 208-09.

³² Oliphant, "The Fancies of a Believer" 250.

³³ Written in 1864. *The Autobiography*, ed. Jay 4.

long succession of kindred and race. Was my mother called to receive the child who was her baby as well as mine? Oh if one could but know, if anyhow even in a dream I could but for a moment see my Maggie with the family in heaven [...]. In Him, the one thing certain in this terrible problem of human existence, I believe, as in the only light which throws a little illumination on the darkness. That is not the agonizing faith that God demands of me. It is to believe in the face of all appearances to the contrary, in opposition to my knowledge of myself, against the aching and yearning of my heart, that in this and all He does He has done well.³⁴

As the head of her own feminized version of the bourgeois family, providing for her large number of dependants through the labours of her pen,³⁵ the mid-Victorian Oliphant was aware she transgressed gender boundaries, writing in 1864: "I have learned to take perhaps more a man's view of mortal affairs,—to feel that the love between men and women, the marrying and giving in marriage, occupy in fact so small a portion of either existence or thought."³⁶ Oliphant had revelled in her lack of confinement: "Thank heaven," she wrote, the mature woman "is under no very profound impression of the superiority of man! His shadow does not stand between her and the sun [...]."³⁷ The distinction between men and women, she wrote, was "ordained visibly" by God.³⁸ And it *was* a distinction: a woman who was not a mother

³⁴ Written in 1864. *The Autobiography*, ed. Jay 7.

³⁵ From the beginning of 1859 her husband's illness saw Oliphant become the sole support of the family; following his death in the same year and left a thousand pounds in debt Oliphant continued what became the life-long support of her three children. Oliphant also supported her alcoholic brother Willie from the early '60s until his death in 1885, and between 1868 and 1870 her widowed and bankrupted brother Frank and his four children became totally dependent on her.

³⁶ *The Autobiography*, ed. Jay 10.

³⁷ Oliphant, "The Great Unrepresented," *Blackwood's* (Sept. 1866): 374, see also 372. Man, she wrote, is but "a creature who, on the whole, considering all his disadvantages, can be made something of."

³⁸ Oliphant, "The Condition of Women," *Blackwood's* 83 (Feb. 1858): 145.

was "of no more use than if she were a man."³⁹ But by the time she wrote "*Dies Iræ*" and "The Fancies of a Believer" her last surviving child had died, leaving her alone at the close of the century, "a mother childless."⁴⁰

Rachel weeping for her children, and will not be comforted because they are not: no words more true have been found out through all these centuries. [...] I need not say that I receive humbly, and with a full heart, all those blessed assurances of the Gospel. But I am compelled to say that, alas! they all tell for but little [...] in the very valley of the shadow of death [...].⁴¹

Marina Warner writes of how the old, childless woman has been read as a sin against nature, "a violation of teleology, and this carried implications beyond the physical state, into wider prescriptions of femininity," including those relating to speech. 1 Timothy 2:12-15, for example, construes the female body as tainted by the first Mother's transgressive and voiced desire for forbidden knowledge, proscribes authority and voice and prescribes silent maternity.⁴²

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.

³⁹ Oliphant, "The Great Unrepresented" 376.

⁴⁰ Written in 1894. *The Autobiography*, ed. Jay 79. Her remaining children, Cyril (Tiddy) and Francis (Cecco), had died in 1890 and 1894 respectively.

⁴¹ Oliphant, "The Fancies of a Believer" 250-51.

⁴² Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage-Random, 1995) 43-44. Illicit desire, "lust," is the sin "with which the tongue is particularly connected [...] for, since the days of Eve and the serpent, [...] seduction lies in talk" (47).

God had "blotted out" Oliphant's mark of womanly "distinction" and her promise in 1 Timothy of salvation through her maternal atonement of Eve's sin. All that was left was her literary reputation, and this, she felt, did not amount to much, knowing that she was respected on the one hand, and creatively disenfranchised on the other, as a "noble woman" who had sacrificed her talents to the exigencies of solo-parenthood.⁴³ While Oliphant had herself helped to construct this estimate with its opposition of maternal and creative endeavour, she had also *equated* her motherhood and authorship, drawing a parallel between the biologically "natural" fact of maternity and her writing: "I have written because it gave me pleasure," she wrote in 1885, "because it came natural to me, because it was like talking or breathing, besides the big fact that it was necessary for me to work for my children."⁴⁴ At other times, however, Oliphant "almost" felt "as if it was I who had sacrificed my child," concurring with contemporary institutional discourses of gender that opposed nature and female creativity.⁴⁵ By 1895 it seemed that both writing and motherhood had come to nought.

[...] I shall not leave anything behind me that will live. What does it matter? [...] now that there are no children to whom to leave any memory [...] what is the reputation of a circulating library to me? [...] God help us all! what is the good done by any such work as mine, or even better than mine? "If any man build upon this foundation...wood, hay, stubble;...if the work shall be burned, he shall

⁴³ Meredith Townsend, "Mrs Oliphant," quoted in Merryn Williams, *Margaret Oliphant* 186. Oliphant herself helped construct this image; see, for example, her well-known remark: "It has been my fate in a long life of production to be credited chiefly with the equivocal virtue of industry, a quality so excellent in morals, so little satisfactory in art" (quoted in Vineta Colby and Robert A. Colby, *The Equivocal Virtue* v).

⁴⁴ *The Autobiography*, ed. Jay 14. "I always took pleasure in a little bit of fine writing [...] which [...] was only done when I got moved by my subject, and began to feel my heart beat, and perhaps a little water in my eyes [...]. I have always had my sing-song, guided by no sort of law, but by my ear, [...] my perfectly artless art [...]" (ibid. 103-04).

⁴⁵ Oliphant, "To Mrs Tulloch," 28 May 1866, *Autobiography and Letters* 207. She was not comforted by quasi-medical discourse, recalling the story told by another woman author who had lost several babies through a heart defect, "which she said was somehow connected with too much mental work on the part of the mother" (*The Autobiography*, ed. Jay 40). The third of Oliphant's children to die in infancy had actually suffered from a hole in the heart.

suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." An infinitude of pains and labour, and all to disappear like the stubble and the hay.⁴⁶

It seemed a cruel paradox; the promises of God at times, wrote Oliphant, seemed a "solemn mockery."⁴⁷ Sacred discourse itself wrote mother love as *the* type of Christian love and the metaphor for divine love: "Can a woman forget her suckling child that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?" (Isa. 49:15). The intensity of maternal love both proved divine love and seemed, from the woman's perspective, to negate it, to condemn maternal desire to being in opposition to the divine, to condemn the human mother to pain, self-doubt, and religious doubt.

In "The Land of Suspense" (1897) Oliphant rewrote the maternal writing body into the scheme of salvation. Waking into the afterlife, the protagonist soon discovers that he is now a disembodied spirit—one of those who are "no longer men but only voices, without identity, without substance, and incapable of uniting themselves to each other save with the loosest ties."⁴⁸ He is among those who are shut out from ultimate salvation, for "those that come home," explains his sister who has herself achieved the spiritual body, "must first be clothed with the building of God, the house not made with hands; those that are unclothed [...] cannot come in" (136). The young man bitterly contrasts his inability to enter his father's house (here the divine and biological patriarchs effectively merge together) and his lack of paternal guidance (146) with his mother's ever open door and her "light always burning to guide me. [...] you called that earth, and this you call heaven!" (136).⁴⁹ But, as another disembodied spirit informs

⁴⁶ *The Autobiography*, ed. Jay 136. Oliphant meditated much on Paul's text (1 Cor. 3) in her last days.

⁴⁷ "The Fancies of a Believer" 250.

⁴⁸ "The Land of Suspense: A Story of the Seen and the Unseen," *Blackwood's* 161 (Jan. 1897): 149. Future references will occur in the text.

⁴⁹ In Oliphant's "The Open Door" (1882) a young male spirit haunts the open door of his dead mother's ruined house, pleading to be let in. The ghost disappears following the local minister's prayer that the mother will be permitted to give her son entry. "The Open Door" 1882, *A Beleaguered City and Other Stories*, ed. Merryn Williams, The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 117-59.

him, "this" is neither heaven nor hell: "It is neither one nor the other. It is the land of Suspense, where we all are until a day which no one knows—a visionary day which, perhaps, may never come, seeing it has been threatened and delayed for all the ages" (141). Shut out of the city, "exiled from home and every tender fellowship" (140), the protagonist gains comfort in the natural realm, the realm of mother nature which Oliphant images as actively maternal: "He sat there amid all the fragrant breathing of the night as in the lap of a mother who cooled his forehead with dewy touches, and subdued his soul into the calm of inanimate things. And yet there was nothing inanimate in this great realm of nature where the air was fresh and free [...]" (141).

Initially the story appears as something of a male complement to the feminized afterlife of "*Dies Irae*," a predominantly male space with a predominantly male cast: the protagonist, his father and brothers, Christ. Unlike "*Dies Irae*," "The Land of Suspense" is bereft of actual adult female bodies. Even the protagonist's sister has a "male" body: she is one of those "beautiful in the first glow of youth, their fair, tall, elastic forms [...] with the faint difference which at that lovely age is all that seems to exist between the maiden and the youth. They were like each other as brothers might be [...]" (135). With the still-living mother (linked to materiality, the world and nature) effectively powerless in the masculine domain (a realm of patriarchy ruled by the King), Oliphant's story projects separate spheres ideology and the traditional Christian gender dichotomies onto a cosmic stage. The story also projects Oliphant's own specific anxieties; as well as concern for her son, the horrors of disembodiment mirror Oliphant's own experience as the "mother childless," her own sense of futility and suspended meaning: "—no home, no duty, no life for him. He was nothing—no man, a Voice, and no more" (144); "here there was nothing—neither good nor evil, neither use nor destruction. [...] to go on in nothingness for ever and ever, to be and not to be, at one and the same time—" (145).

This "nothingness" is the nemesis of separate spheres, both as promise and as threat. The ambiguities of the land of suspense embody the promise of Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor

female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." But for Oliphant the "blotting out" of difference is double-edged, the double negatives of the land of suspense disembody the feminine and render maternal power obsolete. In the space created by the deconstructed dichotomies Oliphant explores but ultimately rejects the notion that the androgynous "spiritual body" (as figured in the description of the young women, for example) is a masculine construction.

Paul's "spiritual body" is, of course, an improvement on and replacement of the "natural body" (1 Cor. 15:40ff). In common with other women of her day, Oliphant disagreed with many of the Pauline constructions of femininity,⁵⁰ and not always the more obvious instances. In "The Fancies of a Believer," for example, Oliphant insisted on the materiality of the spiritual experience.

There are certain moments in life in the recollection of which a certain scene of earth and sky, a mingling of lights or darkness, a consciousness of human sounds or sights breaking in are associated with this supreme sense of a fellowship which is above all—"whether in the body or out of the body I cannot tell," says St Paul. But indeed in the body, in all its humbleness, in all its distraction, when most it needs aid. [...] God [...] to whom it is all unveiled,—who understands to the last fibre, [...] before whom the soul is silent, all-comprehended, all-embraced—in a pause and hush which needs neither thought nor prayer.⁵¹

In this delineation of spiritual experience (which is linked with maternal experience⁵²) Oliphant decenters St Paul's mediation of God and places herself in the breach, recalling her general rejection of male authority: "his shadow does not stand between

⁵⁰ Many Victorian women carried on a dialogue with Paul in both overt and more oblique modes. See, for example, Craik's negotiation of speaking space for women (see above, ch. 4, 160). Sometimes humour is enlisted. Oliphant notes, for example, that "[...] Paul [...] it is curious to note, though often referred to, is never seen in the heavenly regions" (*Dante* 183). These disagreements often occurred, as one would expect, in the context of discussions over women's role in the church.

⁵¹ Oliphant, "The Fancies of a Believer" 249.

⁵² See Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 21 and 174.

her and the sun." In "The Land of Suspense" Oliphant similarly writes the feminine into the masculine text and materiality into the spiritual body. As the title indicates, the immediate target in "The Land of Suspense" is Calvinist eschatology. Jay identifies the relevant text: "The souls of the faithful, after completing their term of combat and travail, are gathered into rest, where they await with joy the fruition of their promised glory; and thus all things remain in suspense until Jesus Christ appears as the Redeemer." As Jay points out, the notion of "fixed states" implicit in Calvin's formulation of the interim state between death and the day of judgement was "anathema" to Oliphant.⁵³ Oliphant subjects Calvin's status quo to a fairy tale metamorphosis and, interrupting Paul, she makes rebirth into the spiritual body contingent on the human mother.

Oliphant's disembodied spirits, free to indulge the "pleasures of the mind" (149-51), tend toward the "intellectual over-production" she identified and despised in the aestheticism of Pater. There are also echoes of the narcissistic scepticism she noted in the life of the aesthete John Addington Symonds.⁵⁴ The protagonist of "The Land of Suspense" is promised that he will gain his desire "to be saved—to be once more a man in His image [...]" (151) when he rejects the egocentric masculine aesthetic, when he begins to "accept and submit," to think on Christ and, advises his father, when "other things that are not you fill your heart—" (147). Accompanying its Late Victorian provenance, the masculine aesthetic also has a patriarchal dimension; the "elders" among the disembodied spirits allude to traditional philosophic argument regarding the hierarchized relation of the body and the reason and evoke the patristic

⁵³ Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 174.

⁵⁴ See Oliphant, "The Old Saloon," *Blackwood's* 147 (Jan. 1890): 145; "Men and Women," *Blackwood's* 157 (Apr. 1895): 636-41. See also Oliphant's earlier review of Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, "New Books," *Blackwood's* 114 (Nov. 1873): 604-09. Pater writes "in furtherance of the grand pursuit of self-culture [...] treating all the great art and artists of the past, and all the centuries of men, as chiefly important and attractive in their relations to that Me who is the centre of the *dilettante's* world" (605). His work sometimes expresses "the very madness of fantastic modernism trying to foist its own refinements into the primitive mind and age" (607), and is evidence of "the decay among us of all true and living art" (609). It is only fair to note that this 1873 review draws a parallel between "High Intellectualism and Low Churchism," equating Evangelical "spiritual selfishness" and aesthetic "self-culture" (605).

body as the "collection of sewers," a reference Oliphant works into a thumbnail sketch of progressive scepticism (150). Oliphant opposes the patriarchal aesthetic to feminine materiality; by yet again utilising Rossetti's image of the ramparts of heaven, where the Blessed Damozel yearns for her earthly lover rather than Christ the bridegroom,⁵⁵ the protagonist's voiced expression of desire for "God and Love" is simultaneously directed back to "mother" earth, where "we were something [...] not nothing" and there was "dear Love" and where the human mother still waits (151).

Indeed the protagonist finds himself incapable of fulfilling his desire to approach God (149); his desire for his mother, however, is reciprocated and results in his transfiguration. This transfiguration is activated by Oliphant's transposition of Christian idiom, her play on the metaphoric relationships between the church, woman and the body, and maternal and divine love. The protagonist goes to the "cathedral in the wood," through which come those who arrive in the afterlife with their spiritual bodies. Oliphant conflates New Testament images of the church and the body and rhetorically invites the biblically-literate reader's participation: "But of that great cathedral what tongue can tell? for it was not built by hands, nor [...] by any workman, whether mortal or immortal [...]" (155). The "house not built by hands" is Paul's figure for the "spiritual body": "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 5:1). The Church is also figured as the body of Christ (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:12-27); and Ephesians 5:21-33 equates the hierarchized relation between man and wife with that between Christ and the church. Playing on these images, and the troping of nature as feminine, Oliphant makes the "cathedral in the wood," formed of the living forest, a feminine space.

This feminine space is a meeting-place for the divine (155); the Trinity, however, is a family from which the mother is excluded. Oliphant's protagonist pleads:

⁵⁵ See Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life* 153. "Whereas the apocalyptic prayer of the church militant is for Christ's presence ('Even so, come, Lord Jesus,' Revelation 22.20), the damozel's last words in heaven ['All this is when he comes,' stanza 23], where Christ is already present, apply to the lover, and have erotic overtones" (154).

"You who are together [...] leave not her alone!" and "reminded the Lord that this was the image He had chosen of a love that never failed. 'Can a woman forget her child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb'" (156). Oliphant's text demands that this central biblical trope (Isa. 49:15) have more than idiomatic force. Authoritative voices within the text attribute the protagonist's salvation to the fact he submitted to Providence and that "he prayed not for himself but for another" (156), but the narrative makes this "other" quite specifically his mother and notes the "unnatural" or miraculous process thus instigated.⁵⁶ It is the protagonist's acknowledgement of maternal desire, the memory of his mother's love and his realisation of her present pain, that bring about his birth into the spiritual body.

The cathedral becomes a maternal space, a womb through which the son is born into the spiritual body. Awakening he feels "the winds of God, which make all the world pure," that inspire "the living walls of that house not made with hands," that "breathed back the words, 'not for himself but another,' [...] blowing in at the wide door" (like his mother's earthly open door) as a "soft touch [...] like the hand of his mother" (156-57). Through these feminine images Oliphant presents the female body (spiritual and natural) as a matrix (as she has done in previous texts); now this matrix is overtly maternal *and* textual; the female body literalizes the Christian word. As the mother had incarnated the natural body, she is also instrumental in rendering the spiritual body.

Behind the cathedral in the wood lies fairy tale and the transformative, magical power of woman, a power that Marina Warner notes is often verbal.⁵⁷ Here, the

⁵⁶ The power of maternal affect can also be seen in Oliphant's exegesis of the story of the Widow's son (Luke 7:11-15). She presents Christ's compassion and resulting miracle-working as being activated by the mother's tears, producing a story that "reads as if it had been a certain relaxation of divine control, a certain human susceptibility bursting into the composure of Godhead, which constrained him to touch and heal [...]." She notes that neither Principal Tulloch nor Renan (the subjects of her review) mention what becomes in her account the maternal manipulation of Providence. See Oliphant, "The Life of Jesus," *Blackwood's* 96 (Oct. 1864): 424.

⁵⁷ See Warner 168.

The motif of the natural mother church appeared in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Bell," in which a mysterious bell ringing in the forest sounds like a mother calling to her child. On their confirmation day, in search of the bell, a king's son and a poor boy come by separate roads to "the

magical power of woman is also the Christian power of maternal affect, a power that can transcend "the great gulf fixed." "The Land of Suspense" is a fantasy of maternal power both within and without the text. Oliphant, herself experiencing the horror of being a "voice only" and shut off from her loved ones, resurrected her child through her writing. Oliphant was under no illusion that such fantasies were ontologically real and yet in many of her later texts, more or less fanciful, she was rewriting, or at least negotiating with, sacred discourse, writing out the problems of the maternal body: of volition and violation, nature and grace, of suffering and faith, of the opposition of human maternal and divine paternal desire—the ever present Fall. The exercise of a woman's will, of her "natural" but transgressive desire for knowledge, had instituted the Fall. As Oliphant increasingly supported the untrammelled exercise of female will in the social sphere, so she emphasised free-will as right and proper in the spiritual sphere, indeed, the ultimate reason for the world's existence. While she herself often felt that she had chosen wrongly, and was often conscious of a sense of imminent fall, she wrote this poised dialectic of volition and violation into sacred discourse: "the moment of choice is not once, as in the old fables, but continually repeated. [...] sometimes we never know, [...] when perhaps we may have chosen right."⁵⁸ At the point of profound doubt, when "prayers are silent" and "We find Him no longer in the silence, as in those former times when we sat under the fig-tree like Nathanael," Oliphant consoled herself by writing what she called "fantastic thoughts,"⁵⁹ transposing the "old fables," reworking the idiomatic into her own idiom. Like "*Dies Irae*" and "The

midst of nature's and poetry's great cathedral; and far above the great invisible holy bell was heard in loud hosanna" (*The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, trans. Erik Christian Haugaard [London: Gollancz, 1974] 279).

⁵⁸ "The Fancies of a Believer" 255.

⁵⁹ "To Mrs Cornish," 28 Oct. 1894, *Autobiography and Letters* 412; "The Fancies of a Believer" 254. Oliphant ended her *Autobiography* with a couplet opposing solitude and writing: "And now here I am all alone. / I cannot write any more (154). Jay notes, however, that "this ending was as carefully contrived as any of her deliberately unconventional endings to novels"; half of the text had, in fact, been written during the period Oliphant was "all alone." Jay considers that "It was not her final bereavement that brought her self-inscription to an end [presumably in 1895], but the growing tension between the fiction and the life" (*Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 29-30). I believe Oliphant transposed this tension into her other "fancies."

Library Window," "The Land of Suspense" defers the total fulfilment of female desire, poisoning the dialectic of volition and violation in a textual moment that will possibly last forever, for "of that day knoweth no man" (157). In this moment maternal idiom unites transgression and faith, the maternal body weeps "no words more true," "the cry of all ages, the cry of faith, the cry of despair, which is in many cases the one and the same."⁶⁰ It is with "the dream of a woman's fancy" that Oliphant translates Christian idiom and this dream, as Oliphant writes of Joan of Arc, is not "a fairy tale" but "a vision made into flesh and blood, the dream of a woman's fancy, more ethereal, more impossible than that of any man—even a poet [...] yet all true [...] simple, actual, made of the flesh and blood which are common to us all."⁶¹ "The Land of Suspense" completes the textual development of an increasingly "idiomatic Christianity," opposed to the self-absorption and secularity of the Late Victorian aesthetic text while also avoiding what Oliphant described as the "contrary error from that [...] of Narcissus": the mistaking of substance for semblance,⁶² the inability to see through the library window.

⁶⁰ "The Fancies of a Believer" 244-45.

⁶¹ Oliphant, *Jeanne d'Arc: Her Life and Death*, Heroes of the Nations (London: Putnam's; New York: Knickerbocker, 1896) 7-8.

⁶² Dante "falls into the contrary error from that which woke love between the man and the fountain—the error of Narcissus—thinking these faces to be shadows which were real persons" (Oliphant, *Dante* 161).

Conclusion

The open-endedness of "The Land of Suspense" concludes the development of Oliphant's "idiomatic Christianity" and is the final example in this study of the development of a somatic textuality. I want to begin this chapter by querying where this open-endedness leaves us, where "The Land of Suspense" is located in relation to modernity. Peter Allan Dale reads the deferral of desire that "closes" Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) as on the one hand the expression of an "old-fashioned" Calvinist moralism, punishing the heroine's elevation of the creature over his maker, and on the other (if we remove this sinful body) an example of incipient modernism, "approaching the Derridean prospect of a radically decentered universe," "a situation which we may be inclined to call characteristically modern: waiting [...] for 'the central signified, the original or transcendental signified' that 'is never absolutely present.'"¹ One could read Oliphant's contradictory formulations, "neither orthodox, nor unorthodox," as proto-postmodern revelations of absence. In the sense that these paradoxical constructions function to enable the writing of both presence and unfulfilled desire, however, they are better described as examples of "the basic trope of fantasy," "the *oxymoron*, a figure of speech which holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing towards synthesis."² This fundamental ambivalence accommodates the unease of the woman writer, poisoning the dialectic of volition and violation; the simultaneous "cry of faith [...] and] despair" also allows Oliphant to experience God "in the body, in all its humbleness, in all its distraction [...] to the last fibre"³ (at least momentarily). Oliphant promotes a somatic

¹ To reach this location "[a]ll we need do is eliminate Lucy's belief that the problem is in herself and not in the nature of things [...]." See Peter Allan Dale, "Heretical Narration: Charlotte Brontë's Search for Endlessness," *Religion and Literature* 16.3 (Autumn 1984): 21.

² Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1981) 21. Jackson writes that "fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (3).

³ Oliphant, "The Fancies of a Believer" 249.

textuality, not a theology of the text; she writes the body as essential to the integrity and realisation of the word. Oliphant was "an apostle of culture to the magazine reading public" not, as she labelled Pater, an aesthetic idolater of the word, "an apostle of the cultured"⁴; her "dream of a woman's fancy [is] more ethereal, more impossible than that of any man—even a poet [...] yet all true [...] simple, actual, made of the flesh and blood which are common to us all."⁵

I have argued that some scholars have had difficulty in reading women's theology and literature, that most critical approaches ("mainstream" and "non-secular") result in the absence of "real" nineteenth-century women to a greater or lesser extent. I have also shown that the contribution of women writers to the rise of modernity has been presented, incorrectly, as an element in the secularization paradigm. In my readings I have been guided by Christina Crosby's point that "one does not 'find' history, one commits historical acts"⁶; I have argued that Craik's and Oliphant's texts are engaged in a conscious and crafted dialogue with secularity as part of their delineation of the modern religious subject; and as such I believe they are usefully considered to be "performances" in the ethnographer Clifford Geertz's sense, where "[b]y inducing a set of moods and motivations—an ethos—and defining an image of cosmic order—a world view—by means of a single set of symbols, the performance makes the model *for* and model *of* aspects of religious belief mere transpositions of one another."⁷ I will return to this point shortly, but first I need to stress that Geertz's "culture" is itself an "acted document" (10); and intertextuality means that the individual text is itself subject to performativity, a performance of discourse.

⁴ See Vineta Colby and Robert A. Colby, *The Equivocal Virtue* (New York: Archon, 1966) xii-xiii.

Oliphant was referring to Pater's delectation in the single poetic word which he believed might make even a bad poem worth perusing ("The Old Saloon," *Blackwood's* 147 [Jan. 1890]: 141).

⁵ Oliphant, *Jeanne d'Arc: Her Life and Death*, Heroes of the Nations (London: Putnam's; New York: Knickerbocker, 1896) 7-8.

⁶ Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and "The Woman Question"* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 151.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic, 1973) 118.

I am using "performative," then, broadly in the sense used by Geertz, but, as far as the *ontology* of the divine goes, with Judith Butler's proviso that "performativity" in its productive sense—"that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names"—is a function not of the individual will, but of discourse itself:

performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. [...performativity is not] the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, [...] that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains [...].⁸

Writing "presence," then, as considered in chapters two, three and five, is not so much the embodiment of the metaphysical or even of Peter Brooks's modern "moral occult,"⁹ but instead ultimately relies on its engagement with theological discourse for its "effect." I am not suggesting that women writers wrote presence in the sense that their writing somehow "created" God, nor that in a secular world the divine could now only be rediscovered through the aegis of the text (as Miller suggests, see above introduction n9) or activated through Carol Christ's sense of performativity (see ch. 1, 43ff), where certain texts are a conduit for the divine and "*function* in providing orientation to life's flow."¹⁰

⁸ Judith Butler, introduction, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 13 and 2.

⁹ [T]he "moral occult" [is] the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality. The moral occult is not a metaphysical system; it is rather the repository of the fragmentary and desecralized remnants of sacred myth. It bears comparison to the unconscious mind, for it is a sphere of being where our most basic desires and interdictions lie, a realm which in quotidian existence may appear closed off from us, but which we must accede to since it is the realm of meaning and value. The melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult. (Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1976] 5)

¹⁰ Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* 4, my italics.

What I do want to suggest are the ways in which Craik's and Oliphant's writing is "performative" in a broadly Geertzian sense, their works functioning as the intertexts of "a cultural system."¹¹ Geertz points out that "all cultural performances are not religious performances, and the line between those that are and artistic, or even political, ones is often not so easy to draw in practice, for, like social forms, symbolic forms can serve multiple purposes" (113). From an historical point of view, of course, this confusion is inherent in Victorian theological discourse (see above, introduction 11ff) and the nineteenth-century texts discussed in this thesis can be usefully understood as examples of cultural performances that include specifically religious performances as an aspect of their semiotic system. Sometimes these performances include direct literary "translations" of Christian rituals, for example, the "playing" of *Dies Irae* by both Craik and Oliphant (see chapters 2 and 5) and Oliphant's use of liturgy more generally in *Dies Irae*. The Mass/Holy Communion is celebrated many times (*A Life for a Life*, *A Beleaguered City*, for example). The efficacy of prayer is frequently enacted, even when, as in "The Land of Suspense," the actor cannot see the result.¹²

Geertz stresses that performance is crucial to religious belief:

It is in some sort of ceremonial form—even if that form be hardly more than the recitation of a myth, the consultation of an oracle, or the decoration of a grave—that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men [sic] and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet

¹¹ Geertz ch. 4 "Religion as a Cultural System."

¹² While Geertz stresses the importance of group performances, some of Christianity's most central performances of the word (spoken or written) are individual activities, solitary prayer and the spiritual autobiography, for example. Jay notes of Oliphant that "Certain portions of her *Autobiography* are almost a continuous prayer," and the fact that in times of stress Oliphant would carry written forms of prayer in her purse points to the particularly "concrete" nature of this religious "act." Oliphant believed her prayers effected spiritual experience (see Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 152, 174).

Owen Chadwick points out that to the Victorians the liturgy held a combined literary and religious status: "the Prayer Book was a possession [...] almost like the authorised version" (See *The Victorian Church*, 3rd ed., vol. 2. [London: Black, 1971] 309).

and reinforce one another. In a ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world [...] it is [...] out of the context of concrete acts of religious observance that religious conviction emerges on the human plane. (112-113)

I have argued that Craik's and Oliphant's texts, with their embodiment of theology and textualization of the subject, contributed to the formation of the modern religious subject. In order to consider, in a general sense, the public significance of the texts I have covered and their possible influence,¹³ I want to stress the "concrete" nature of "performativity" and briefly note some of its manifestations. Firstly, I want to reiterate the popularity of my novelists with the middle-classes, the hegemonic class. Elaine Showalter writes of Craik that she "was both influential and representative; and it is chiefly because she wrote for 'novel-readers, pure and simple,' the mass middle-class audience, that she makes an appropriate case study in Victorian female authorship."¹⁴ Oliphant is similarly seen as representative, described by Q. D. Leavis as a "type of the nineteenth-century literary woman, [and] perhaps the type of literary woman of all ages [...]"¹⁵; she has also been noted as immensely influential, an "apostle of culture to the magazine reading public" (see above, n4). Although the historian Sonya Rose is not talking about women writers, I believe it is useful to read both Craik and Oliphant as examples of her "prominent people," those whose interpretations of experience are formulated in "*cultural productions*," "public

¹³ The suggestion, in a recent critical work, that until the 1890s "the social and political impact" of women's religious fiction was limited to that achieved by "the mere story of a woman's attraction to a lover of another religion" is manifestly incorrect, and amply demonstrates the continuing need for historically based readings of women's religious writings. See Carolyn Christensen Nelson, "Novels of Religious Doubt and Faith: Adeline Sergeant and John Oliver Hobbes," *British Women Fiction Writers of the 1890s*, Twayne's English Authors Ser. 533 (New York: Twayne-Simon, 1996) 60.

¹⁴ Elaine Showalter, "Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment: A Case Study in Victorian Female Authorship," *Feminist Studies* 2 (1975): 7. Craik was seen by contemporaries as representative to the extent that her work was utilised by Richard Holt Hutton in "Novels by the Authoress of 'John Halifax,'" *North British Review* (1858) to delineate the main characteristics of "feminine fictions." Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, rev. ed., (London: Virago, 1982) 87-90.

¹⁵ See Q. D. Leavis, introduction, *Autobiography and Letters* 33-4.

performances or widely available texts," "composed of shared cultural symbols which are used to mediate what is already widely known or understood and the articulation of ideas about something new. They are rhetorical devices meant to persuade."¹⁶ In *Olive* (1850), as I have shown, Craik developed the feminine angel-artist figure whose body and text replace the "worn-out forms of religion"; reviewing George Eliot over a decade later, Craik wrote a cautionary acknowledgement of the immense power of "what used to be thought 'a mere writer of fiction'":

the modern novel is one of the most important moral agents of the community. The essayist may write for his hundreds; the preacher preach to his thousands; but the novelist counts his audience by millions. His power is three-fold—over heart, reason, and fancy. [...] who of us is safe from his influence? [...] Fiction forsooth! It is at the core of all the truths of this world; for it is the truth of life itself. [...The fiction writer] is not like other men, or other writers. His very power makes him the more dangerous. His uncertainties, however small, shake to their ruin hundreds of lesser minds [...]. "You are the very Prometheus, carrying the stolen fire. See that it does not slip from your unwary hands, and go blasting and devastating the world."¹⁷

Craik's and Oliphant's products were widely consumed, helping supply the insatiable public appetite for both religious works and novels in general. Even in 1880, the year opening what Gerald Parsons sees as "a significant watershed in the history of religion in modern Britain" where the social significance of religion can be seen to be diminishing,¹⁸ the enormous market for religious books continued unabated: "The

¹⁶ Sonya O. Rose, introduction, *Limited Livelihoods : Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture 13 (Berkeley : U of California P, c1992) 8. Italics original.

¹⁷ Craik, "To Novelists—and a Novelist," *Macmillan's* (Apr. 1861): 442-43. Craik notes of her use of the masculine "He" that "we use the superior pronoun in a general sense, even as an author should be dealt with as a neutral being, to be judged solely by 'its' work [...]" (442).

¹⁸ Parsons, introduction, *Religion in Victorian Britain*, vol. 2: *Controversies*, ed. Gerald Parsons (Manchester: Manchester UP, in association with the Open University, 1988) 13.

Publishers' Circular for 1880 listed 580 new novels but 975 'theology, biblical, etc.'¹⁹ As far as my particular authors went, by 1887 22,000 copies of Oliphant's *A Little Pilgrim in the Unseen* (1882) had been printed; in her lifetime these religious tales were probably her best seller.²⁰ Moreover, while in 1898 Mudie's Lending Library listed 89 Oliphant titles,²¹ for most of the twentieth century it has been *A Beleaguered City* and other selected Tales of the Seen and the Unseen that have remained available. The two novels that I have read as delineations of the feminine non-sectarian text, Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman* and Oliphant's *Salem Chapel*, have both continued in print.

There are many reasons for the endurance of these texts in the market-place, but the one I want to suggest here is the position of these particular works as the texts of a "diffusive Christianity." The term "diffusive Christianity" was originally used by a number of historians to refer to a working-class version of Christianity prevalent in the late nineteenth-century. This urban working-class "diffusive Christianity" was non-doctrinal (although hell and eternal punishment were widely rejected) with an emphasis on ethics and practical application, and a belief in heaven. Instead of regular churchgoing, attendance at church or chapel was limited to rites of passage and annual festivals. As regards the late Victorian urban middle-classes, Hugh McLeod's 1974 survey concluded that most of its subjects were "'unconscious Broad Churchmen', brought up to attend church and assent to Christian doctrine, but with a conception of religion which was largely practical."²² Gerald Parsons suggests that the positions of the two classes were not so very different:

¹⁹ See Raymond Chapman, *The Victorian Debate: English Literature and Society 1832-1901* (London: Weidenfeld, 1968) 62.

²⁰ Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 292-93.

²¹ R. C. Terry, *Victorian Popular Fiction, 1860-80* (London: Macmillan, 1983) 11.

²² Gerald Parsons, "A Question of Meaning: Religion and Working-Class Life," *Religion in Victorian Britain*, Vol. 2: *Controversies*, ed. Gerald Parsons (Manchester: Manchester UP, in association with the Open University, 1988) Parsons 80.

given that the emergence of late Victorian diffusive Christianity coincided with the relative dissolution *within* the major non-Roman Catholic denominations of their traditional doctrinal and confessional orthodoxies, and their replacement by internal pluralisms marked by calculated doctrinal ambiguity and a deliberately unspecific theological ethos, the gap between the more lukewarm "conventional" church member and the more articulate "diffusive Christian" may already have been rather less than either Victorian churchmen would have liked or historians have generally supposed.²³

Parsons considers it was not until the twentieth century that the middle-class could be said to have moved beyond late Victorian "unconscious Broad Churchmanship" into a version of diffusive Christianity; what began as a class-based "religious style" then became a cultural idiom, perhaps the "religious style of the majority of the nation as a whole" (85). He stresses that this "religious style" is neither superficial nor indicative of absence (78-79). There are clear points of congruence between working-class "diffusive Christianity" and the non-sectarian Christianity promoted by both Oliphant and Craik as discussed in chapter two. This suggests, at the least, that such texts may have played a part in disseminating this "religious style" and may have contributed to its adoption by the middle-classes.

Some historians have queried the nature of women's participation in the secularization process. Gail Malmgreen, for example, wrote in 1986 that "Perhaps women were less thoroughly 'secularised' than men; this is another question that awaits exploration."²⁴ More recently, Rosemary O'Day has suggested that women were crucial to the "proper functioning of the churches" in the late nineteenth century and that in "no sense was their role peripheral or seen to be so"; she concludes that, contrary to Cox's theory of secularization as a process of state encroachment on the

²³ Parsons, "A Question of Meaning" 80. Italics original.

²⁴ Gail Malmgreen, introduction, *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930* (London: Croom Helm, 1986) 8.

churches' role, "it seems [...] the church entered a crisis when women ceased to support its efforts as effectively as traditionally they had."²⁵ That women's eventual diminution of support for the church did not necessarily mean they rejected religion per se is demonstrated by the fact that although the "New Woman" of the '90s was often portrayed as an agnostic or atheist, Malmgreen notes that in fact "the 'new woman' was often a new religionist."²⁶ Earlier in the century women can be shown to be working against the secularising tendencies of non-sectarianism itself. Leslie Howsam's study of the British and Foreign Bible Society, for example, shows how women were instrumental in translating what was a designedly non-sectarian organisation for the purposes of business—"a society for furnishing the means of religion, but not a religious society"²⁷—into a non-sectarian religious society. This was largely an effect of their gender positioning; women's thorough-going participation in the "Bible Transaction" (women largely ran the local Bible Associations and were "the backbone of the Society" [53,59]) could be legitimated according to religious, but not commercial, considerations (52-53). Their very participation, then, in itself reconstituted the BFBS's non-sectarianism as a religious, rather than secular, matter. Ensuring the successful dissemination of the Word under a non-sectarian banner made these women agents of a "diffusive Christianity."

²⁵ Rosemary O'Day, "Women in Victorian Religion," *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain, 1840-1914*, eds. David Englander and Rosemary O'Day (Aldershot: Scolar, 1995) 357 and 358. O'Day's tentative remarks are based on the "Religious Influences Survey" conducted by Charles Booth between 1897-1902.

Philippa Levine demonstrates that even traditional secularization milestones such as the 1857 Divorce Act can be read less as state encroachment (secularization in Cox's sense) than as an intrenchment of religion, its democratisation: "the construction of a civil code in no sense implied the abandonment of Christian imperatives, merely their further absorption into the cultural and political mainstream." See Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 99.

²⁶ Christabel Pankhurst became a Seventh-Day Adventist, for example, and Christian Science appealed to a number of late-Victorian feminists. See Malmgreen 6. On feminism and agnosticism/atheism, see A. R. Cunningham, "The 'New Woman Fiction' of the 1890's," *Victorian Studies* 17 (Dec. 1973): 182.

²⁷ Luke Howard, Quaker chemist and meteorologist, n.d. Quoted in Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Cambridge Studies in Publishing and Printing History (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 7. Howsam writes that: "while religious impulses motivated the Society and its members, the potentially divisive discourse of doctrine and denomination was rigorously excluded from its day-to-day operation" (xiv) and the Society represented itself as engaged in a commercial reality.

Another prominent arena in which women were involved in textual dispersion was the Sunday School, identified by Callum G. Brown as one of the "new agencies of a diffusive Christianity" (40), disseminating religious influence within a pluralistic environment. Women were involved in the spread of religious literacy on a number of platforms (including the home), and, as I show in my discussion of the history of fairy tale and Craik's use of it in *Olive* (chapter four), women writers also intervened self-consciously in the politics of religious literacy. Such an intervention occurred within a text; it could also occur (as with the eighteenth-century educationalists, the BFBS and Sunday Schools) through the text's participation in the "history of the book in society."²⁸ Craik's *John Halifax*, for example, became an expression of that quintessential statement of literature's religio-social role, the Sunday School prize book. The novel was even specially edited for such a purpose; *John Halifax's Boyhood: Told from Mrs. Craik's "John Halifax, Gentleman"* (London: Nelson, 1909) is a collection of edited chapters from the novel, a hagiography of the literary role-model.

Such an example, dating from a period in which the major Protestant denominations had espoused a "calculated doctrinal ambiguity and a deliberately unspecific theological ethos" (see above, n23), signals a clear institutional appropriation of Craik's novel as an ideological tool. The relationship of the feminine non-sectarian text's relationship to hegemony is, however, far more complex than this. Geertz's "theory of religion" explains how ideology becomes lived experience through the process of "mystification," how "the model *for* and model *of* aspects of religious belief [become] mere transpositions of one another" (118). Nevertheless, he also points out that cultural performances "represent not only the point at which the dispositional and conceptual aspects of religious life converge for the believer, but also the point at which the interaction between them can be most readily examined by the detached observer [...]" (113). As religious performances Craik's and Oliphant's texts

28 Howsam xv.

depart from an institutional rehearsal. The resulting performance might be an attempt to synthesise experience and metaphysics; nonetheless, as both subjects in and observers of the performance, acknowledging the conflict between the text and the body, their embodiment of the one and inscription of the other, brings about a transformation of the model.

Although their theological critiques are also social critiques, until recently critics have often represented both Craik and Oliphant as conservative; where they have been positioned in a subversive relationship to hegemony this is usually couched in lady-like terms: Craik is involved in a "genteel conspiracy," Oliphant is a "gentle subversive."²⁹ These somewhat ambiguous formulations seem to resonate with Oliphant's ironic containment of subversive potential—"(are not all visionaries revolutionaries?)"—from *A Beleaguered City* (80). Their delineations of a feminine non-sectarianism—opposing a domestic maternal realm to the social and theological law and institutions of the Fathers—make both Craik's and Oliphant's texts part of the "feminization" of religion, a process that has been described, like them, as mildly (and thus, to Ann Douglas, ineffectually) subversive; Barbara Welter's understanding of the "feminization of religion" is that it results in "a more genteel, less rigid institution."³⁰ Welter's original formulation of North American "feminization" as an ideological necessity, a repository for virtues that were no longer considered part of the public sphere, obviously constructs "feminization" as negative (a point developed by Douglas). Because privatisation is equated with the declining social significance of religion (what Callum

²⁹ See Elaine Showalter, "Dinah Mulock Craik and the Tactics of Sentiment: A Case Study in Victorian Female Authorship," *Feminist Studies* 2 (1975): 6; D. J. Trela, ed., *Margaret Oliphant: Critical Essays on a Gentle Subversive* (Selinsgrove: Susquehan University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1995).

³⁰ Douglas mourns "The Loss of Theology: from Dogma to Fiction" (chapter title). North America, which Douglas carefully distinguishes from Britain, "lost its male-dominated theological tradition without gaining a comprehensive feminism or an adequately modernized religious sensibility. [...] 'Feminization' inevitably guaranteed, not simply the loss of the finest values contained in Calvinism, but the continuation of male hegemony in different guises" (*The Feminization of American Culture* [New York: Knopf, 1978] 13).

See Barbara Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion: 1800-1860," *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, ed. Mary Hartman and Lois W. Banner (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974) 138.

G. Brown describes as the "shorthand definition of secularization"³¹), "feminization" can be seen as no more than an aspect of the secularization process. But if feminization is considered as a potential component in the diffusion and dissemination of religion, obviously the impact of "theology as style" is far greater, and not divorced from the public sphere.

Where they are "rhetorical devices meant to persuade," Oliphant's and Craik's "cultural productions" both promote and criticise the "feminization" of religion. As I demonstrate in chapter three, "feminization" involves the rejection of the patriarchal narrative, its story and its narratology.³² As already mentioned, however, Oliphant notes the limitations of "feminization," its containment within the male narrative. Both authors identify and refute secular tendencies within the discourses of "femininity" itself, Craik's engagement with the materialistic conduct book heroine in *Olive* and *A Woman's Thoughts*, for example, and Oliphant's parodic duel with the "fleshly" heroine of the sensation novel.

The term "diffusive Christianity" was used in 1903 by the bishop of Rochester, who described it "as the penumbra of the 'embodied' Christianity of the church."³³ My usage inverts this formulation: it is in and through the texts of a "diffusive Christianity" that embodiment occurs. Craik and Oliphant's development of a somatic textuality is "diffusive" both in the sociological/historical sense and in the discursive terms of Garrett Stewart's "cultural idiom," where theology undergoes an "intertextual transfiguration, the diffusion of its axioms and vocabularies within the circuit of another discourse, where the theological becomes literary precisely by being

³¹ This classic definition of secularization was formulated by B. R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (1966). See Callum G. Brown, "A Revisionist Approach to Religious Change," *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. Steve Bruce (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 32.

³² Linda Peterson also writes more generally that Oliphant "refused to do the cultural work of Victorian patriarchy by keeping love and marriage at the center of fictions of female development." See "The Female *Bildungsroman*: Tradition and Revision in Oliphant's Fiction," Trela 87.

³³ See Jeffrey Cox, *English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870-1930* (New York: Oxford UP, 1982) 93.

deliteralized."³⁴ I consider Craik's and Oliphant's texts as involved in the "systemic mutation" of public discourse which results in the embodiment of theology and the rise of the textualized religious subject (that is, the modern religious subject). This religious subject, like Nancy Armstrong's generic individual outlined in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, is primarily female and exists in a complex relationship to hegemony.

Ultimately Craik and Oliphant's engagement with theological discourse is best understood not as a position on what is essentially a political spectrum, but as illustrative of the effects of the interrelationship between the discourses of gender and theology and the subject. This interrelationship is best approached through an historically grounded analysis. The case of Oliphant, in particular, shows that this does not imply a straightforward translation of the body into the text. Oliphant's self-textualization has misled many into considering that certain of her texts are best read as autobiographical; as the products of a "middlem[a]n of literature," however (see above, ch. 3, 134n67), the Oliphantine text is patently intertextual.

While Craik's and Oliphant's texts themselves promote a universalised theology, critically they are most fruitfully read as historical documents. In chapter two I show how the non-sectarian novel, while privatising and universalising theology, is a non-secular discourse, an agent of "religionization" that writes the Christian body as maternal. Chapter three demonstrates that, even when these texts are engaged with "theology" in its narrower sense, for example the debate over the doctrine of Atonement, their theological discourse is embedded in other contemporary discourses and events, truly a matter of life and death. Their identification of the religious subject as primarily feminine means both authors engage with and work against contemporary formulations, reembodying and reinscribing the feminine and the theological, as for example *A Life for a Life*'s "living sacrifice," where transgression is reincorporated into the Christian body. Writing this body could take them beyond the church and

³⁴ Garrett Stewart, rev. of *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology*, by Michael Wheeler, *Victorian Studies* 35 (Spring 1992): 337.

other institutions, to *Olive's* new "religious field" provided by fairy for example, or to Oliphant's fanciful "Land of Suspense." In the space where "there were no doctrines," both authors attempt to read "that pregnant phrase, *La vraie signification de la vie*" (*A Beleaguered City* 28). In both cases this involves an investigation into the "poetics" of faith and doubt, and an interrogation of Christian representations that leads to the reanimation of the dead metaphor.

The mid-century Christian body identified by Craik as the maternal expression of female desire in harmony with Scripture becomes at the end of the period Oliphant's maternal body in conflict with the divine. As Oliphant's novels become more "secular in tone,"³⁵ her "fancies" move beyond the realism of midcentury with its location of God in the quotidian and toward the full realization of the somatic text. Oliphant, who had demonstrated a profound distrust of the literature of affect in *Salem Chapel* (1863) becomes the sensational Rachel Mildmay, weeping for her children, who will not be comforted, and writes maternal affect as an agent of presence. Susan's silent body as the "Church of the future" in the parlour becomes the writing mother of "The Land of Suspense," her "Idiomatic Christianity," "neither orthodox, nor unorthodox," poised on the verge of the modern.

³⁵ Jay, *Mrs Oliphant: "A Fiction to Herself"* 209.

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